

In 2017, an op-ed piece ran in The New York Times entitled “The Strange Persistence of Guilt” by David Brooks. In the piece, Brooks was attempting to explain why in the modern world, with all of its “liberation” and freedom from constraints that we have a persistent and resilient sense of guilt that remains. He writes that we still have emotional instincts and intuitions about what is right and wrong but no overall framework to explain how they fit together.

Brooks opens by noting that we live in an increasingly “moral” society. When he uses the word moral, he doesn’t necessarily mean that in the sense of a Christian ethic, but rather he intends to describe our culture as one that is filtering everything through a lens of right and wrong. We flirt with words and emotional instincts about what feels right and wrong, but our ability to hold to a settled criteria to help us think, argue, and decide has been lost.

The removal of any conception of the divine has left us without any ability to filter the effects of sin that we all feel through an objective lens of right and wrong. This sort of secularism in which objectivity is eroded was believed to point toward a sort of easygoing relativism. He writes that the belief was that,

**With no common criteria by which to judge moral action, we’d all become blandly nonjudgmental—sort of chill, pluralistic versions of Snoop Dogg: You do you and I’ll do me and we’ll all be cool about it. Whatever feels right.**

But most would agree that our social discourse around moral issues has not turned into an easy relativism of utopian individual choice; rather, it has gone the opposite direction. Culture wars have intensified, rage and moral confrontation is the norm, and the furious intensity of our collective cultural conversations has heated to a fever pitch.

As American life has further secularized and political religions have filled the vacuum left by the decrease of traditional religions, moral conflict, pressure, and frenetic energy has only grown. Our cultural climate has not moved toward a calming pluralism where any and all ideas are left to themselves; our moral conflict and outrage have only risen. Brooks states, “We are living in an age of great moral pressure.” The point Brooks is making is that although religion seems to be in retreat, guilt seems more powerfully present than ever

He goes on to write...

**...we have no clear framework or set of rituals to guide us in our quest for goodness. Worse, people have a sense of guilt and sin, but no longer a sense that they live in a loving universe marked by divine**

**mercy, grace and forgiveness. There is sin but no formula for redemption.**

In this world that is emotionally and morally charged, where everyone is their own arbiter of right and wrong, we are left tired, fearful, and riddled with guilt with no way to absolve or atone for the sins we feel. It turns out that being our own god isn’t as life-giving as was promised.

So what do we do, and who do we turn to as a means to lead us out of the mess we find ourselves in? How do we deal with the guilt that hovers beneath the surface of our lives? Is there something in the Way of Jesus that will help us to recognize our own frailty and provide the means and process that leads to redemption?

Of course there is and that is what the church has traditionally called the practice of confession. For the last three weeks during our Lenten series, we have explored this dimension of our faith known as confession. And in preparation for Easter, we have been slowly sitting in our own need for confession. We have spent time confessing, all in an effort to move our hearts toward a preparedness to celebrate resurrection next week. But I want to close this final week of the series before Easter with a long look at who this God is that we confess to and how we can find hope and a way forward in a morally confused age.

Who is this God to whom we confess? This is the question we are looking at with the text in Psalm 139. Let me explain that Psalm 139 is different from the other Psalms in this series. It is not a Psalm of confession, but rather, it is a Psalm that helps us know and understand the God we are confessing to.

As we have explored over the past three weeks, confession is a practice that brings the raw, unfiltered self before God as a means of recognizing our own frailty and sinfulness before Him. It is the direct recognition of our own inability to hold everything together, to recognize our own sin and disobedience, and then seek help outside of ourselves for redemption.

Psalm 139 is one of the more famous Psalms, both because of its poetic beauty and its theological depth. The reality is that we could spend weeks here in this Psalm, but for our purposes today, we will focus on its three largest themes. As we look at the text, it can be outlined fairly clearly: 1-12 - the inescapable bigness of God, 13-18 - the inescapable nearness of God, 19-24 - the inescapable invitation to God.

So turn with me to Psalm 139, and let’s begin looking at this beautiful reflection on God by David. Notice first that the entire Psalm is framed by verse 1 and verses 23-24. These verses serve as bookends to the entire Psalm that give shape to the overall tenor and focus.

*"You have searched me, Lord, and you know me" (v.1). And "Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (vv. 23-24).*

A cursory close reading of the text reveals that the obvious theme for the Psalm centers around the word "know" or "knowledge." In Hebrew, the word is "yada," and it appears seven times in the text. Here in verses 1-2 and twice in 23, but also in 4, 6, 14. The Lord knows his own; this is the clear message of the first 18 verses. And it provides the foundation for the petitions and affirmations in verses 19-24.

The Psalm opens and closes with a declaration and request for introspection. It is the realization that being known by God is the foundation of meaning and purpose. Because if, in fact, we are known by God, and if, in fact, God is good, that changes everything!

This prayer, "search me, O God..." is a prayer that elicits two responses, fear or rest. Fear, because if you are the arbiter of your own understanding of goodness, then any external authority, like God, is perceived as a threat. On the other hand, rest, because if we recognize our own inability to bring our own redemption, then an external source that can "lead you in the way everlasting" is a way out of the rat race of our modern life.

As we will see develop through the Psalm, God's knowledge of us and our world is comprehensive, total, and unwavering. In that, what we find is that we are fully known—every last part of us is known, and not just that, but we are known and also truly loved, without pretense, qualification, but by our being a beloved creation of God himself. In this, we find life and rest because the inescapability of God's knowledge of us and our world is the source of life and redemption.

So with that in mind, let's now work our way through the text.

**You have searched me, Lord, and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. vv. 1-3**

David opens this Psalm with a discussion about the omnipresence of God, the ubiquitous presence of God.

But as he opens, notice the polarities in what he references about God's presence. He knows us whether we are active ("rise") or inactive ("sit"). He knows us whether we are home or traveling. He knows our thoughts (internal) and our behavior (ways). He knows both the inside and the outside of ourselves. This is a depth of understanding that most of us cannot wrap our heads around. We are able to view others from the external and see the behavior, but we have a very difficult time seeing the internal dispositions. All of this is different for God; he is all-knowing. Nothing we can do will escape the fact that God knows us entirely.

The radical intimacy portrayed in this Psalm is on full display here as the primary thrust of the Psalm is found at the end of verse 1, "You know me." What is so stunning is that God knows us more than we even know ourselves. So frequently, our own self-deception can get us stuck in cycles of sin. Where we deceive ourselves and rationalize, justify away

our own failures, and fail to fully recognize how we are the source of our brokenness and, therefore, cannot be the source of our healing. But we can rest assured that ultimately God knows us, and this becomes the ground from which we can seek the salvation we all long for and need.

**Before a word is on my tongue you, Lord, know it completely. You hem me in behind and before, and you lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain. vv. 4-6**

David goes so far as to say that before he does something before he says something, God knows it completely! It is a knowledge that even precedes our own knowledge of ourselves. But this is also a particular type of knowledge, "know it completely..." meaning comprehensively, fully, entirely. What we are really beginning to wrestle with here is the reality that God has a different perspective on time. We have a tendency to speak of God as being trapped within time. We say things like, "He can perceive the future." But that assumes that he is only in the present. The sort of omniscience of God spoken to in this Psalm alludes to his altogether different understanding of time.

Imagine time as a journey down a road. There are many travelers on the road, and it is a winding road. Each of the particular travelers has a specific viewpoint and vantage point, but none can see the road in its entirety. Each traveler is at a different point in time. But then imagine there is a mountain in which the entire road can be seen from a different vantage point. God's relation to time is like being on the top of that mountain and his ability to look down and see the entire road. For God, on top of the mountain, all the travelers are present to God. This is how God relates to time; he sees all of it at once.

It is, therefore, that only God knows who you were, who you are, and who you will become. Only God knows you completely and fully. You don't even know yourself at this level of depth. Because from God's perspective, he knows the fullness of who you are and who you will become.

"You hem me in behind and before..." The only part of us that we know is merely a small slice of who we are, a small segment and window in time. But God knows you fully and truly loves you. Those two things are representative of the ache in our hearts, and they are fulfilled within the relational goodness of God. God knows you infinitely more than you know yourself, and in that knowledge, still loves you.

To be fully known is to be completely vulnerable, and the reality is that most of us are not comfortable with this level of vulnerability. But for the Christian who understands the beauty and goodness of God, this vulnerability is liberating. We no longer must hide behind a pretense or a facade, nor can we, for God is fully knowledgeable and fully present to all of who we are. It is because of God's inescapable bigness that we are able to bring the fullness of who we are to God and deal with the guilt that we carry because we recognize our need for a savior. Thus, we can, like the psalmist, celebrate as good news the omniscience and omnipresence of God.

**Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me," even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you. vv. 7-12**

Not only is David profoundly taken by the knowledge of God, and he then considers the inescapable bigness of God. In order to reflect and explain the presence of God, David yet again turns to contrast polarities to explain the comprehensiveness of God's presence. "If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there..." "If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea..." "even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you."

Think closely of the imagery used here.

Heavens = Stars

Depths = Sheol (place of the dead, the place where you lay the dead low)

Wings of the dawn = East where the sun rises

Far side of the sea = West - Remember, for Israel, the Mediterranean Sea was to their West, so this was the fullest West.

David declares, if I go as far East as I can go, or as far West as I can go, you are there! As high as I can go, or as low as I can go, you are there! The text does not give the impression that David is trying to evade God's presence but is amplifying the inescapability of God. No matter where you go, God is there; nothing you can do, nowhere you can go and escape God's presence.

And again, the truth of this provokes one of two responses, a sense of safety or a sense of fear. If God is good, then this can only be good news! If God is threatening you, then, of course, it provokes fear. But either way, the reality is that God is present everywhere.

Now, when we think of God's presence everywhere, we can tend to think of God everywhere, like the way that the physical state of gas is everywhere. But that image ultimately falls short. It isn't that God is dispersed into every point in space, but rather that God is fully and completely present at every point in space. All of God is everywhere. God is not dispersed throughout, but all of God is everywhere.

What we are learning is that God is present at every point in time, and God is present at every point in space. And not only is God present, but David says that wherever he finds himself, "your right hand will hold me fast..." Regardless of where we find ourselves, God's hand is ready to guide us; he is ready to lead us to life—to correct, restore, forgive, and lead.

## **The Inescapable Bigness of God**

God present in every moment in time and God present in every point in space is profoundly powerful in understanding who we are and how God is able to work us toward reconciling us to himself.

There is a deep sense of transcendence that emerges when we wrap our heads around a God that is present at every moment in time and at every point in space. But is this transcendent God approachable? Or does transcendence merely mean removed and unapproachable? What does this God know about us? Because if God is merely transcendent, then God is not approachable, and we are not able to bring our deepest confessions and vulnerabilities before God. But as David continues, God is not merely transcendent; he is deeply immanent. And the paradox of God is that he is inescapably big as well as inescapably near.

## **The Inescapable Nearness of God**

**For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. 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. Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. How precious to me are your thoughts, God! How vast is the sum of them! Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of the sand—when I awake, I am still with you. vv. 13-18**

The polarities continue, and they continue to fill out the intimate look at God's presence.

"you created my inmost being" - The soul.

"you knit me together in my mother's womb." - The body.

So the first dimension here of God's immanence is that God has and is holding together the very molecules of your existence. As Colossians would say, Jesus is holding the universe together, sustaining it through his own existence. Every aspect of our being is held together by God; whether or not we believe, the reality is that God is the sustenance of all things. And at the same time, look at verse 16. "...*all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.*"

Not only is our physical and spiritual existence held together by God, but our very history and future are sustained by God. God not only creates, ordains, and sustains your body and soul, but he also creates and ordains your history. Notice that David is expressing the expanse of his existence. Knit together at the beginning of time in your mother's womb, and also, every last day is ordained at the end of time. From conception to the last breath, God is in charge. All of your days are ordained. From the earliest days to the latest days, and God alone is the author of life.

## **The Christian Ethic for the Dignity of All Life - Conception to the Grave**

You see, here is one of the places where we derive the Christian ethic for the dignity and value of all life. From the early Christians to the Ancient

Jews to the modern faith, the church has always held to a posture of the dignity of life at all stages, from cradle to the grave. Here is why. If all of the existence is held together by God, and if all of our days are ordained by God, anything that seeks to disrupt and impose death is to impose oneself into the position that only belongs to God. God alone is the author of life, and to impose humanity over that is to impose ourselves into the position of God.

Every dimension of the human has been created by God, both inward and outward; both the body and the soul were created by God. All our days, our history, and our future, our very existence in space and in time is held by God.

The bigness and the nearness of God are inescapable. He is present in all time and space, and he knows your very existence and holds your history together. He knows all things about the universe and all things about the molecules of your body. But as I alluded to it earlier, this kind of God generally evokes a few different responses to him. It is a threat to the radical individual or a source of comfort for the follower of God.

In verse 6, when David says, *"The knowledge is too wonderful for me..."* The word there for wonderful is also the word "incomprehensible." The phrasing is more along the lines that the information is more than David can handle.

Here lies the necessity and opportunity of confession. That the all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-present God is aware of the whole of who we are, and we no longer have to hide under false pretenses. It is the very character and essence of God that allows us to approach his throne boldly, ready to confess, renounce, and repent. Take comfort in this church; God knows you fully and loves you truly, and in that, he is ready to receive your confession. This is ultimately what leads to the invitation to God that we see in the closing few lines.

## The Inescapable Invitation to God

Let's continue to what would seem like a strange twist in the text to verses 19-22.

**If only you, God, would slay the wicked! Away from me, you who are bloodthirsty! They speak of you with evil intent; your adversaries misuse your name. Do I not hate those who hate you, Lord, and abhor those who are in rebellion against you? I have nothing but hatred for them; I could them my enemies. vv. 19-22**

What is happening here? After all of this profound declaration of God's presence and immanence, we get to a place in the text where it appears that David is directly seeking revenge. Old Testament scholar Derek Kinder makes the point that the place David gets to in the Psalm is the reflection that God is wholly different and altogether holy. Consequently, there are those then who do not align with this reality of God. The passion that seems so misplaced right here is probably more out of zeal for God than it is hatred.

It is important to note that not all of the Bible is prescriptive of how we should act. Rather, what we see is a descriptive example of how we can pray. And that is, we are to pray from the raw honesty of where we are;

this is what David is doing. If we are honest, all of us have some hate within us, some of us are better than others at expressing it in healthy ways, but all of us have a level of hate within us. And David, through example, is teaching us that we can bring that part of us before God in prayer. We can confess that fullness of who we are because God knows it anyway.

These verses, particularly coupled with 23 and 24, which we will look at in a second, present the culmination of all that David has said in the preceding verses. You see, after David has explored the depths of God's presence and all that it means for him, the result is an agony for God to make right all that is wrong. And this swells up within David with this sharp cry for all to be made right. It is a cry for God's will to be done, where the world is set to rights and evil no longer wins the day.

But David is also keenly aware of his own propensity to sin and his own ability to contribute to the brokenness of the world, and we arrive at verses 23 and 24. It is as if David is saying, "God, I recognize how holy and mighty you are, and because of that, there are many people who reject this and war against the very idea of you as holy! It would be better for them to be gone as I look at that landscape. But, God, I also recognize my own ability to war against you."

**"Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." vv. 23-24**

This is a stunning way to end the Psalm. After all that David has expressed, his inescapable presence in both time and space, God's ability to be present through darkness, chaos, light, and joy, through all of the inescapable bigness and nearness, all of it, David invites God to utter scrutiny of his life. He invites God all the way in. "Find any sin within me, know where I am anxious, explore every corner of my being and my heart and then when you have done so, lead me in the way of life."

This word "test me" is from the Hebrew word *bachan*, which was originally used as a word that spoke of the testing or purifying of fine metals, like gold or silver. These fine metals would be melted down to expose the impurities and allow those to rise to the surface so that the metals can be of a more pure substance. This is the process through which David is asking God to "purify" him.

What a prayer! A stunning exposé on the human condition is finished with the utter welcome of God into the core of his existence to be led to new life. This is an affront to our modern sensibilities. What David so beautifully declares here that is counter to everything we would want to organize our lives around is this...

The biblical conception of the "heart" is the executive center of the person. It is the place in which all decisions are made. It is the place from which we live; it is the center of the individual. For a modern westerner, we have made that place, the heart, the space in which we alone exist, making the decisions and authoritative role in our lives only for ourselves. Our modern world says, "Only I have the right to enter my heart and make decisions; I am the sole authority of my life."

But David makes the complete opposite point in this Psalm. Rather than dictating his own life, David says, "Search my heart, God! Enter into my heart and lead me in the way everlasting!" It is a confession of his inability to control and dictate his own life. It is the deepest confession in which he allows God into the shadows, particularly the very shadow of his own heart, and allows God to shine the light there.

You feel it. I feel it. All of us desire ultimately to live our own lives. But the Christian confession, the confession of David here in Psalm 139, is that we cannot. At least not in the way that leads to life. It is a distortion to believe that we have the possibility of leading our own lives.

What I am finding all the more true of our world is that we all know we need to be saved, Christian or secular alike. We recognize the frailty of our lives, and we recognize the broken sinfulness of our own hearts. But there is no other story that offers a cohesive story of dealing with our guilt. The only manner in which that is dealt with is through confession, repentance, and forgiveness. And we can rest assured that the inescapable bigness, nearness, and the invitation of to God is for us.

Humankind has ruined their own souls. We cannot save it; therefore, we must find something beyond ourselves to save us, and that something is Jesus Christ. The offer that our faith makes is to stop trying to hide and stop trying to run from the inescapable God. The God who welcomes us with a divine offer of love and embrace. And it is through that very offer of love and embraces that God also invites us to seek change and transformation of ourselves.

My friends, this world offers an exhausting rat race of being and becoming our own god, but this has left us broken and weary. The good news of Jesus is that we have been saved; we are being saved, and we will be saved. This is the hope that we hold if we confess and come before the inescapable God because it is the inescapability of God that leads to life.

This is the beauty of these final verses, "*Search me, God, and know my heart.*" This is the beginning of our finding Jesus' salvation. We name and confess the reality that we are not our own savior, but we name our sin and confess our faults in the very loving view of God, ready to forgive and embrace.

### **Prayer of Examen - Search me, O God.**

I want to walk through this prayer of examen with you for a few minutes. There is no right or wrong way to engage in the prayer of examen. But rather, you could do this in brief like we are about to, or you could extend this time to as long as you want. The goal is not to be good at this but rather to allow this structure of prayer to guide your encounter with the Lord.

### **Preparation**

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

Take a moment and set aside whatever is in your hands and whatever your mind is preoccupied with. Remind yourself of the inescapable bigness and nearness of God. Remind yourself that God is fully present at every point in space and in every moment of time.

### **Invitation**

Now take up the inescapable invitation to God. God is present. He has been present, and he will be present to you now. Not in any way that we control him, but by the very essence of God, he is present. Invite God to lead this short exploration of your internal world. Ask him to show you what is true about yourself.

### **Examination**

Now, as we begin to examine our own hearts with God, pray David's concluding words in Psalm 139. "*Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me...*"

Consider what you are currently harboring in your heart. What has you filled with joy? What has you irritated? What has you worried? What discouraged you today? What patterns do you notice in your heart over the past week? Whether you saw it or not, where has God been active over the past week in your life?

### **Reconciliation**

As you open your heart to what God is doing, if you haven't already, begin to confess the ways your heart has been bent inward toward sin. Ask God to forgive you of any sin you have committed, trying to be specific. As you allow those areas of your life that need forgiving to rise to the surface, pray again the words of David, but this time just the closing line. "*...lead me in the way everlasting.*"

As you sit in that moment, ask yourself these few questions. Is there anyone who needs your apology? Is there anyone you need to forgive?

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