

# PRAYER

Psalm 139  
Our Intimacy in Prayer

## Introduction

We have reached the midway point of our “Prayer” series, transitioning from Ephesians 3:14-21, where we saw the focus and assurance of Paul’s prayer, to the intimacy evoked in the prayer of the psalmist in Psalm 139.

We do so as we are blessed this week to sit under the preaching of Dan Whitehead, executive minister of Sanctuary Mental Health Ministries.

And, as we continue to move forward in this series, we again want to ask:

*How is your practice of our congregational rhythm of morning prayer developing?*

## Connection Group Study

### COMMENTARY STUDY

vv. 1-6. The psalmist begins, in this first stanza, with a profound declaration of the intimate relationship between himself and the Lord, stressing how the Lord searches out and knows the psalmist. Note that the Hebrew verb for “to search” in verse 1 **חָקַר** (*chaqar*) is interestingly the same verb used

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

vv. 1-6. *Praise:* How has the Lord’s deep knowledge of your “path, your lying down, and all your ways,” proved to be a blessing in the past? Encourage one another with your sharing.

Judges 18:2 regarding the men of Dan “searching out” land for an inheritance. Here it has the sense of thorough investigation, as in, “You have thoroughly come to know me, whole mind and soul.”

Of these verses, the fourth-century Church father and Archbishop of Constantinople Chrysostom beautifully writes, “As a man knows what roots he has in his garden, though there be not a flower appearing, yet he can say, when the spring comes, this and this will come up; so God knows our whole frame, our principles, etc.”

vv. 7-12. The omniscience of God remains a primary theme in this second stanza as the psalmist ties God’s “wonderful, extraordinary” (v. 6) knowledge of his people to God’s omnipresence. As there is nowhere in the world—whether the highest heights of the glory of heaven, or the deepest depths of *Sheol*, the dark place of the underworld—that we can traverse apart from the Spirit of God, so we are assured by his incomparable power, which turns darkness to light. Note that John

*Pray:* Pray that your Connection Group’s knowledge of one another would reflect, imitate, and participate in the wonderful knowledge of our searching, protecting Father.

*Confess:* While certainly having here a positive connotation in context, the word for “hem”/“hedge” in verse 5 is צור (*tsur*), which most commonly means to besiege or press upon, as in the sieging of a city, or the pressing of an army upon another (see 2 Kings 17-18). In this sense, in what ways does the thought of God’s intimate knowledge of your life inspire feelings of apprehension, and even skepticism? If comfortable, share with one another these feelings, and confess any deeper-lying fears.

*Discern:* Who are the individuals in your life who know you well enough to “discern your thoughts from afar”? If you find it difficult to name such persons, to whom might God be calling you to grow deeper in relationship?

vv. 7-12. *Discuss:* What emotions are stirred in you by the beautiful imagery of verses 8 and 9, of God in the depths of *Sheol* and at the uttermost parts of the sea?

*Study:* Of what other biblical references do these verses of God’s omnipresence and omniscience remind you—perhaps a bit of Jonah 1, Colossians 1, or Acts 17? What connections do you see with these other biblical passages?

*Pray:* Ask that the Spirit would make God’s presence known to your Connection Group particularly in the inevitable moments of

Wesley, that 18th-century father of Methodism, understood the “wings of the morning” and the “uttermost parts of the sea” as a reference to the Jewish understanding of East and West respectively—those most distant points on the horizon.

When considering these marvellous proclamations of God’s presence, it should be remember that pagan deities in the ancient world were conceived to be largely confined to certain areas, as to the local temple. The contrast between those deities and Yahweh then could not be any clearer.

vv. 13-16. In this third stanza, the psalm reaches its most intimate level, as in turns inward to draw upon the very act of our creation—our being birthed in the womb—as testimony to the care and concern of the Lord; he who searches us and knows us; he who is in heaven, and in Sheol, and in everywhere in between.

Note that the word for “wonderful”/“marvelous” נִפְלְאִים (niphla'im) in verse 14 is the word used to describe God’s acts of miraculous deliverance in the Exodus story, as in Exodus 3:20 and 34:10.

“darkness”—of “Sheol”.

*Discern:* How might you and your Connection Group be making known this summer to your neighbourhood that night is bright as the day in our Triune God? What does it look like to proclaim the gospel of God’s omniscience and omnipotence during this season, even if you break during these summer months?

Ellen van Randerat  
"Psalm 139"  
(in shapes and colours)  
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vv. 13-16. *Pray:* Pray and give thanks for the beautiful gift that is the creation of your life, even when the seasons of darkness seem to cast a shadow upon that gift.

*Discuss:* If you know anything about the ancient religion, or even more generally about the ancient world, in what ways would the statements of these verses contrast those of the prevailing view of humanity?

*Discuss:* How does 21st-century North American society make it difficult to hear the biblical truth that “I am fearfully and wonderfully made”?

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*vv. 17-18.* The Psalmist proclaims the truth that the Lord has not only formed us, and thus knows us ever so intimately, but that the Lord's "thoughts" continue to be formative for him, and for us by extension, in their number and preciousness.

*vv. 19-22.* Some biblical commentators perceive little connection with this imprecatory (invoking curses or judgment upon the enemies of God) part of the psalm, with even John Calvin noting in his commentary that "it is unnatural to seek to connect this with the preceding verse." Yet if the previous verses have spoken of intimacy with the God who has created us, formed our days, and discerned our thoughts, then the psalmist seems to be describing a world where many do not live in recognition of these realities, and to be pleading for a righting of wrongs done by such people—by those who live apart from the intimacy with God described throughout the psalm.

Yet, at the same time, the psalmist seems alert that he must be ever relying on God to not fall himself into the same distorted reality.

*Confess:* In what ways does your soul find it difficult to believe the truth that you, in your very being, are the wonderful work of God? Confess with and encourage one another.

*vv. 17-18. Pray:* Pray that the Spirit would fortify you to seek God's wisdom in his precious counsel, each and every day.

*Reflect:* Are there any rhythms/liturgies of prayer that might help you to keep continuously before you the works and wisdom of God?

*vv. 19-22. Pray:* Pray that those who live apart from God's gifted intimacy, those who may speak against God with "malicious intent", would be moved by the conviction of the Spirit to pray the psalmist's concluding thought: "Search me and know my heart!"

*Pray:* Pray continuously this week that God would make clear, on a daily basis, what it means to walk in his everlasting ways.

*Listen:* End your time (using YouTube) meditating upon Dan Schutte's "You Are Near," a song inspired by Psalm 139.

Notes: