

# THE INESCAPABLE GOD

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**PSALM 139:1-18**

**LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH**

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Psalm 139 is among the best known and most well loved in the Psalter. It contains some of the more memorable and poetic expressions of praise in our lexicon.

- Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? (v. 7)
- I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made (v. 14)
- If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.

It is a beautiful Psalm—a beautiful expression of wonder and praise to the God of creation. A powerful reflection on what it means to be a child of God—of what it means to *belong* to God and be *loved* by God.

The Russian-American novelist, Vladimir Nabokov was describing the experience of reading great literature when he wrote these words, but I think they could equally be applied to the wonder David expresses in this Psalm:

*All we have to do is... let our spines take over. Although we read with our minds, the seat of... delight is between the shoulder blades. That little shiver behind is quite certainly the highest form of emotion that humanity has attained.... Let us worship the spine and its tingle. Let us be proud of our being vertebrates, for we are vertebrates tipped at the head with a divine flame.*

Psalm 139 is a psalm that we read between our shoulder blades, with our spines 😊.

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We are continuing in our summer series on creation. We tend to think of creation as something “out there” that we “live in.” Creation is rocks and trees and oceans and rivers and birds and fields and squirrels and deer and all kinds of other “nature-y things.”

At times, we forget that we human beings are a *part* of creation, not detached observers sitting on the sidelines. We are part of the wonder of all that God is made.

The question is, “what *kind* of a part?” What does it mean to be human? How do we fit? What role are we to play?

One of my deepest convictions about being a follower of Jesus about the Christian narrative in general—one that I repeat often—is that this story **tells us the truth about who we are as human beings.**

It tells us the truth about who we are in the context of all kinds of other options.

Darrell Johnson, a former professor and current pastor in Vancouver, would often tell us that the task of the Christian wasn’t to decide if they wanted to choose to listen to and follow the voice of God or not. The question, rather was, “Of all the voices that are out there, which one will we listen to?”

In other words, we are all ***already following, aligning ourselves with, and committing ourselves to some*** ideology, some view of the world, some understanding of the nature and role of human beings, *whether we realize or acknowledge this or not.*

There are obviously other voices seeking to convince us what it means to be human and who we are as human beings.

The dominant narrative out there, the one taught in our universities and in books and articles and many other public forums, is that human beings are nothing more than another animal—the most highly evolved, perhaps, the most sophisticated of the animals, but nothing more than the product of time + chance.

On this view, human beings are not in any way special or deserving of any unique status. We have no privileged role to play, and no right to impose ourselves and our needs upon the rest of creation.

The Australian philosopher Peter Singer even coined a term called “species-ism” (a la “racism”) to get at the idea that humans ought not to act like we are better than the rest of the animal kingdom simply because we are human.

Most people wouldn’t go as far as Peter Singer, but this narrative has a lot of traction in our culture.

So, on the one hand, human beings are in no way special or separate from the rest of creation

On the other hand, we are obsessed with ourselves and our uniqueness and seem to exalt in this at almost every turn. Have a look at social media and the obsession we see with documenting and sharing our lives online. Or “helicopter parenting” and “princess culture.” Or the millions of advertising dollars spent daily in the attempts to convince us

that “we are worth it,” that nothing ought to stand in the way of our every desire being fulfilled.

Ours is surely among the more individualistic and consumeristic (which is deeply connected to our individualism) cultures that the planet has ever seen.

In addition, some people—including many Christians who are ashamed at how we have abused God’s creation for far too long—think we should talk less, not more, about human uniqueness.

Our convictions that we are special have done a lot of damage to the environment, whether we are talking about greed and overconsumption, environmental degradation and carelessness, dangerous commitment to industrial capitalism or whatever.

And yet, it seems that whether we are religious or not, we can’t really escape our uniqueness. Our language betrays us at every turn.

Many have pointed out that the language of (mostly secular) environmentalism is the language of *stewardship*.

It *depends* upon a view of human beings as somehow privileged, special and capable of undertaking the task of “saving the planet.”

The imperative to “save the earth” is not typically an obligation that is presented to chimpanzees or turtles.

We *know* we are special and that we have unique capacities and responsibilities as human beings, even if we don’t like to admit it.

So, the long and the short of it is that as a culture, we’re not quite sure what to make of ourselves.

Where to from here?

Again, we have to choose to listen to the right kinds of voices.

One such voice that I have come to appreciate and rely on heavily when it comes to questions of science and faith and creation and human nature is that of John Polkinghorne.

Polkinghorne is a rare creature, indeed. He is both a professor of mathematical physics and an Anglican priest. Oh yeah, and also, a knight ☺.

In his book called *Exploring Reality*, Polkinghorne identifies seven reasons for unapologetically affirming the that human beings, while obviously “of the earth” and part of creation, are utterly unique:

1. **Self-consciousness**—we are aware of ourselves as agents with past, presents and futures, we are able to foresee death, we can assess experiences, make changes, etc.
2. **Language**—storytelling, poetry, describing concepts and experiences
3. **Rationality**—scientific understanding, logic, the ability and the hunger to understand and describe our surroundings; incredible capacity to
4. **Creativity**—art, culture, and the delight that we experience in these things
5. **Morality**—we understand ourselves to be the objects of moral rights (to be treated in certain ways) AND obligations (duties that we owe to others, to animals, to creation); while animals have been shown to exhibit some forms of compassion, mutuality, and altruism, we would think it absurd to *expect* moral behaviour from a pig or a dog
6. **Spirituality (God-consciousness)**—across virtually all human cultures at all times, there has been a sense that there is a spiritual, sacred reality, that we can encounter; impulse to worship
7. **Sin**—A deep seated sense that things are not as they should be—in us or in the world and a sense that this goes far beyond the ordinary instinct for self-preservation that we see in the natural world.

Most of us know these things intuitively. But it is voices like Polkinghorne’s that help us to hold this evidence clearly before us and ask the question, “what does this cumulative picture tell us?”

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What John Polkinghorne helps us to see through the lens of science and philosophy and history, King David helps us to see through the equally important lens of personal experience.

Psalm 139 is no abstract analysis of human nature, no rational defense of human uniqueness. David’s is a view from the *inside* of a living, dynamic relationship with his Creator.

The language of Psalm 139 is the language of longing and loving, of knowing and being known by God.

It is the language of praise and wonder at the intricacy and complexity of human life, and the astonishing reality that we can commune with our Maker.

The pronouns are personal.

“Search me...”

“Know my heart...”

“Test me...”

“You created me...”

“You knit me together...”

“Your works are wonderful...”

“Your eyes saw my unformed body...”

“All the days of my life were written in your book...”

“How precious to me are your thoughts...”

From beginning to end, David knows that he belongs only to God.

“When I awake, I am still with you” (139:18).

David’s song of praise is shot through with the conviction that human beings stand alone in all of God’s creation in their capacity to know and be known by God.

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Some of you will perhaps have noticed that we didn’t read *all* of Psalm 139 this morning. Specifically, we left out the nasty part.

Beginning with verse 19:

*O that you would kill the wicked, O God,  
and that the bloodthirsty would depart from me—  
<sup>20</sup> those who speak of you maliciously,  
and lift themselves up against you for evil!  
<sup>21</sup> Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord?  
And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?  
<sup>22</sup> I hate them with perfect hatred;  
I count them my enemies.*

Well, that’s not quite as inspiring as the rest of the Psalm, is it?

It doesn’t seem to fit. It’s so violent and full of anger, so unworthy of a person in tune with God and God’s purposes.

We don’t like this kind of complexity, and so we omit them from our readings 😊.

Yet even in the nasty parts of the psalm, we are told the truth about who we are.

We have our shadow sides. We are, at times, full of self-righteous anger; at times, full of misplaced zeal for God.

We are people well acquainted with hatred.

In David's words here, we see the simple truth that while we are the utterly unique and dearly loved children of God, we are also sinful, prone to destruction and evil.

Our inclinations are far from pure and virtuous all of the time.

We are in need of being conformed to the image of the one who taught us to love, not hate our enemies.

In Psalm 139, we encounter both the profundity of human beings as the image bearers of God and the God who knows and cares for us, *and* the impulses of a fallen humanity, always in need of repenting, turning around, and reorienting ourselves to the plan and purposes of our Maker.

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But the main subject of Psalm 139 is, finally not really us at all, but God.

This is because we cannot truthfully talk about human beings without talking about the One in whose image we are made, the One whose creation we have been entrusted to care for.

What is God like?

In a word, "inescapable.

This is most powerfully and poetically expressed in verses 7-12:

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.

In 1893, the English poet Francis Thompson wrote a poem whose title expresses this very well and has echoed down ever since: "The Hound of Heaven." We have this picture of a God who never gives up the chase, is always pursuing, always beckoning, never growing weary in his pursuit of his children.

This God from whom nothing is hidden is also the source of everything that we have and everything that we are.

We cannot hide from God because God not only *knows* us but he *made* us. Human beings, in all of our complexity, were God's idea.

This can simultaneously be a source of terror and great comfort!

- Terror
  - we cannot hide from God
  - God knows us in all of our conflicted motivations, all of our sinful habits, all of our misdirected desires and longings, all of our apathy and despair
- Comfort
  - we do not *need* to hide from God
  - the God who knows us better than we know ourselves, loves us and cares for us; the God who made us, upholds and sustains us, forgives and restores us.

We cannot outrun the hound of heaven.

And this is a very good thing.

Thanks be to our inescapable God.