The God Who Knows and Is Near

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[0:00] We're going to listen to the reading in a few minutes' time, but before then, let me start. In 2015, the computer gamer and gaming creator, Marcus Pearson, commonly known as Notch, he was the creator of the computer game Minecraft.

If you've got teenage kids and sons, you probably know about Minecraft. He sold his company to Microsoft for \$2.5 billion, and he owned 70% of the company.

He earned \$1.7 billion in that transaction. One of the first things he did was he outbid Jay-Z and Beyonce on an offer they'd put in a house in Beverly Hills, just because he could.

But anyway, a couple of months later, he is sitting in Ibiza. Ibiza's an island of Spain, a real kind of party island. He's sitting in Ibiza, and he sends out a couple of tweets.

This is when Twitter was still called Twitter. And the tweets go as follow. 548, the problem with getting everything is that you run out of reasons to keep trying.

[1:12] 550, hanging out in Ibiza with a bunch of friends, partying with famous people. Well, Marcus Person is not the first person, and certainly not the last person, to experience the irony of being surrounded by people all around you, people having a good time, partying, having fun, and yet feeling this weird sensation of being alone and isolated, feeling alone in the midst of all these people.

And again and again, we hear the reality. It feels ironic that some of the most lonely people in our world are those that are not without anybody around them, but those that are surrounded by others around them.

And of course, the digital age in which we live has only exasperated us, right? MIT professor of social studies, Sherry Turkle, she wrote a book, an amazing book, in 2011.

So it's a little dated now, called Alone Together. And she writes how the digital age has only exasperated us. The fact that we are surrounded by people and voices, and yet we feel more and more alone.

Listen to what she says. She says, Technology has become the architect of our relationships. We fall prey to the illusion of companionship, gathering thousands of friends online, and yet confusing tweets and wall posts or Instagram posts with authentic communication.

[2:41] We have the illusion of companionship without real friendship. We turn to technology to help us feel connected in ways that we can comfortably control, but we are not so much in control and not so comfortable.

Sherry Turkle's touched on something quite amazing there, that in order to have real relationships, relationships that actually impact you and change you, you've somehow got to relinquish control.

You've got to somehow step out of your comfort zone. And yet we find it so difficult to do this. We live in a city in which we are alone together. And I think Hong Kong, actually, we struggle with this even more than maybe other major cities.

And one of the reasons for that is because, one, we work so hard. We work such long hours. If you're working 50, 60, 70 hours a week, it's really hard to find the time to build deep relationships, to get people to know people and to open up yourself so that other people can know you.

But I think the other reason is, in Hong Kong, we are experts at saving face. Right? We're experts at playing the game and knowing how to put our best foot forward, of looking like our world is all fine when we can easily crumble inside.

[3:55] In the words of Sherry Turkle, we are alone together. I wonder if you resonate with this. Friends, do you ever feel alone, isolated, neglected?

Do you ever feel overlooked or marginalized? Do you sometimes feel forgotten? Do you ever feel like nobody cares or nobody really knows you?

This summer, we're going through the book of Psalms. And today is the last Psalm that we're looking at. And the book of Psalms was the prayer book of ancient Israel.

It was the book that they used to help them in their prayers, but it was also a book of theology. In the ancient world, not many people could read or write. Almost nobody had access to their own personal scriptures like we do today.

And so the book of Psalms were these songs that David and many others wrote that helped them pray to God, but also taught them about the character of God, the nature of God.

[4:55] And we've looked at all these Psalms over the summer. And today we come to our final one, Psalm 139, which we sang about earlier. And this Psalm is going to tell us that those who know God are the most secure, loved people on all the planet.

And it shows us how the kindness of God changes us deeply inside. And so on that note, can I invite Reza up to come and do our reading this morning? And just one note, while Reza comes up, you can come on up.

That last song we sang this morning is taken from Psalm 139. And it's the first time I think it's ever been played and sung publicly ever because Phoebe wrote that song.

And so Phoebe, great to have one of your songs that you wrote this morning. It's a great song. Well done for doing that. And well done for being brave enough to put it out there for us to sing it. I know that takes a lot of courage.

That was a great song to sing this morning. So let's listen to God's word as we read Psalm 139 together. Good morning, church. Our scripture reading for today is in the book of Psalm 139.

To the choir master, a psalm of David. Starting in verse 1. Oh, Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up.

You discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, oh, Lord, you know it all together.

You hand me in behind and before and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me. It is high. I cannot attain it. Where shall I go from your spirit?

Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there. If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me and your right hand shall hold me.

If I say, surely the darkness shall cover me and the light about me be night. Even the darkness is not dark to you. The night is bright as the day, where darkness is as light with you.

[7:09] For you formed my inward parts. You knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am furfully and wonderfully made.

Wonderful are your works. My soul knows it very well. My frame was not hidden from you. When I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed substance.

In your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them. How precious to me are your thoughts, O God!

How vast is the sum of them! If I would count them, they are more than the sand. I awake and I am still with you. O that you will slay the wicked, O God!

O man of blood, depart from me! They speak against you with malicious intent. Your enemies take your name in vain. Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord?

[8:08] And do not love those who rise up against you? I hate them with complete hatred. I count them my enemies. Search me, O God, and know my heart.

Try me and know my thoughts. And see if there be any grievous way in me. And lead me in the way everlasting. This is the Word of God. Great, thank you, Riza.

Let me just pray for us as we come to us. Father, we want to hear you speak to us from your Word. We want to know what you have to say to us. As we say each week, God, we're not interested in the thoughts or the opinions of man.

We get plenty of those out there on our phones every day. God, we want to hear your Word. We want to hear what you have to say. God, won't you open up the eyes of our hearts and unblock our ears to hear you speaking to us.

God, we pray that Psalm 139 will come alive to us today. We pray this in your great name. Amen. Okay, if you've got your Bible or the bulletin open, keep it open.

[9:11] We're going to look at this and look at the Scripture quite a lot. So I want to encourage you to have it open in front of you. This Psalm is made up of 24 verses, and it breaks up into four sections of six verses each.

So it's quite a straightforward breakdown. The first three sections, verse 1 to 6, 7 to 12, 13 to 18, are quite similar.

It's the same idea that David is giving from different angles. And then the last section is quite different, or we see David's response. In the first three sections, we see how God knows us and cares for us.

In the last section, we see how God's love changes us. So let's dive in and take a look at it. Look at the first section with me, 1 to 6. I'll read it again. It says, Oh Lord, you have searched me and known me.

You know when I sit down and when I rise up, you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down. You are acquainted with all of my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, oh Lord, you know it altogether.

[10:21] You hem me in behind and before. You lay your hand on me. And such knowledge is too wonderful for me. It is high. I cannot attain it. One of the things that should strike you straight away when you read these verses is how many times it talks about the word known or describes being known.

Lord, you've searched me. You know me. You discern my thoughts. You are intimately acquainted with all of my ways. Every word, every thought, every desire in my heart.

God, you know it. You understand me. You get me. David is basking the fact that every aspect of his life is known to the God that he's come to worship and praise.

God knows him and understands him. God, there's nothing about my life which is outside of your understanding or getting, your feeling. Look at verse two.

He says, you know when I sit down and when I rise up. I don't know if you've ever had this where you're looking for somebody maybe at home or in the office and you go to every room in the office and you're calling them and you can't find them and you turn to somebody and say, has anybody seen John around here?

[11:34] God never has that thought. That thought never crosses his mind. He never says, has anybody seen Henry? He knows every aspect of our lives. He says, you understand my thoughts from afar.

Verse four, even before a word, even before a sigh, even before a cry of joy, even before a cry of frustration is on my tongue, you know about it, Lord.

In other words, God, you know me and understand me better than I even know myself. God, you're intimately acquainted with all of my ways, all of my thoughts, all of my hopes, all of my dreams, all of my longings, all of my fears, my anxieties, the things that I worry about, my elderly parents, that medical report that I'm expecting this week, my job insecurity.

God, you know about each one of them. You're intimately acquainted with them. You know them perfectly. David acknowledges that this is sometimes hard to comprehend.

It's hard to understand how can God know everything about our lives. He says, such knowledge is too wonderful for me. It's too high. I cannot attain it. God, and yet he knows the certainty of it.

[12:56] God, you know me. You know me better than I know me. You know me perfectly. Friends, do you, like so many in our city, ever feel alone, unknown, isolated, forgotten, overlooked?

Do you ever wonder whether anybody knows what's going on in your heart, whether anybody cares? David reminds us that the God of the Bible, the God that we've come to worship and praise this morning, is not just, he's omniscient and he's sovereign, but not just in a general or cosmic sense.

It's true that God knows everything about the universe, things that we haven't even discovered yet, things about how black holes were formed and what's on the other side of them and what the universe is going to look like, a hundred billion years from now and what's beyond even the furthest expanses that we've been able to discover in the universe, beyond our furthest telescopes.

God knows all of that, but he's saying it's not just that God is omniscient in that sense, he's omniscient about every minute, intimate detail of our lives. Your cosmic, powerful God knows and understands our inner life, our thoughts, our fears, our hopes, our feelings.

More than just know it, he understands it. Look at the second section, verse 7 to 12. It's not only that God is all-knowing, David delights in the fact that God is all-present everywhere.

[14:21] He says, where shall I go from your spirit? Where shall I flee from your presence? If I were to ascend to heaven, highest heavens, God, you would be there. If I make my bed in Sheol, in the grave, in hell, God, you would be there.

If I take the wings of the morning or dwell on the uttermost parts of the sea. Just remember, in the ancient days, people didn't know the world was round, they thought it was flat. If you sail too far, you're going to fall off the cliffs of the sea, and who knows what's beyond the abyss.

David says, even if I were to do that and go beyond the end of the abyss, God, I don't know what's beyond there, but I know that you will be there. Even there, your hand will lead me.

Your right hand shall take hold of me. Now, Psalm 139 obviously comes two Psalms after Psalm 137. Okay? You don't need to be a rocket scientist.

Work that out. Psalm 137 is one of the most difficult Psalms in the Bible because it's written at a time when God's people had been taken out of Israel into Babylon.

[15:21] And the Babylonians were a ruthless nation. They came and attacked Israel. They slaughtered thousands of people and they dragged the rest of them into exile in Babylon. And Psalm 137 is this heartfelt lament as the people agonize over being stuck in Babylon.

Well, Psalm 139 tells us that even the most God-forsaken place on the planet, a place like Babylon, a place like war-torn Ukraine, even that it's actually not God-forsaken for God is with us in the midst of those places.

Even the most immoral, corrupt place you can imagine, God is there with His people. But that's actually not really David's concern here, is it? David isn't so concerned about the physical geography of the place where the God is there.

He's more concerned with the metaphysics. He's concerned about where can I go in my heart? Where can I go psychologically, emotionally? God, will you be there if I go to the darkest night of the soul?

In the deepest despair, God, will you be there or will you abandon me? Look at verse 11. He says, surely the darkness will not cover me and the light about me be as night.

[16:38] Even the, sorry, if I say surely the darkness will cover me and the light be as night, even the darkness is not dark to you. The night is as bright as the day for darkness is as light with you.

David says, even when wickedness and despair and suffering surround you, when you're overcome with grief, you're overwhelmed with anxiety, God is not forgotten.

God is not abandoned. God is not given up with you. He's there with you. He's there already. Verse 12, darkness and light are alike to you. The dark night of the soul is not a place where God has abandoned you but a place where you discover and find God in a whole new way.

God has gone before you and He's there with you. Verse 10, even there your hand will lead me, your right hand lays hold of me. I don't know if you've ever experienced this but the picture there is if you're walking in complete darkness, maybe you're hiking somewhere and you come into some complete darkness, there's no moon, it's pitch black at night and you're stumbling, you don't know where you're going but there's somebody who does know the way and they take hold of your hand or maybe you're walking down a dark alleyway and there's no light and you're petrified but there's somebody who knows what's going on, they take hold of your hand and they lead you and guide you.

He says, your hand will lead me there. It's not just that God is vaguely omnipresent. If you set your heart and He'll lead you and guide you and sustain you through every season of life.

[18:11] David goes on, look at the third section here, verse 13 onwards. David here describes the fact that every aspect of His being is intimately known and designed by God.

Look at verse 13. It says, you formed me God in my inward parts, you knitted me together in my mother's womb. It's amazing to think that even before our mothers knew that they were pregnant with us, when they were completely oblivious and had no idea, God was there forming and knitting cells together, multiplying and forming, multiplying and forming, so that the first embryonic form of you was being formed.

God knew about it. Verse 14, I praise you, I'm fearfully and wonderfully made. My frame is not hidden from you when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

Your eyes saw my unformed substance. In your book were written every one of them. The days that were formed for me, even when as yet there were none of them. David's point here is that His existence is the result of God's deliberate and intentional will.

David reminds us there's no such thing as an accidental baby. There's no such thing as an unwanted baby. Each one of us, designed, brought together by God. When I was growing up, we had a family friend that was a musician and he had just recorded an album in the studio and he was living with us for a couple of months before he moved overseas.

[19:40] And so, he's staying in our home and the first delivery of his new album, his CDs, arrived at our house. They'd just been cut and labeled and packaged and they arrived at our house.

And so, he opens the box and he takes out the first of his new album. And he puts it in the CD player in our living room and he puts it on for us to listen. And as we're listening to the songs, he's describing each of the bits of details.

He's saying, listen, listen, listen. There's got to be this bass riff now. Wait. And then you hear it, right? Or he says, hey, do you hear that sound behind the chorus? The reason we put that in is because we wanted people to hear this part.

In each song, he's describing the minute detail and the little intricacies of the song that most people will be completely oblivious to. Why? Because he's the creator.

He's the artist. He knows every minute detail of every song and why it's there and what the purpose is and what it contributes to the song. David's point here is that God knows every minute detail of his people.

[20 : 49] He knows us physically. He knows us emotionally. He knows our hearts. He knows what's going on. Nothing about us is an accident. Before you were born, before conception had taken place, before the first tiniest cell had multiplied, God had designed your life and planned you and who you'd be.

Your eyes saw my unformed substance. In your book were written every one of them. The days that were formed for me when as yet there were none of them. Friends, if you are in Christ, God's care for you and God's love for you is not like the love that we have for other people because we've gotten to know them and we've discovered something wonderful about them, something lovely about them.

God's love and care for us is what brought you into being in the first place. God initiates our existence. God doesn't complete our existence. As we've said many times before, God's love for us is not based on something that he's discovered about us but something that's found in his heart, not something that's found in us.

And so again, I ask you the question, do you ever feel neglected, alone, unknown, uncared for? Do you ever feel misunderstood that nobody gets you?

Friends, you see what God is saying here? The sovereign God of all creation, the one who brought galaxies and universes into being, who designed the solar system, knows and understands every care and every detail of your life and he's watching over you.

[22:23] He knows the cares of your heart. He knows the agonies of your heart. He knows what keeps you up at night. He's carrying, sustaining and guiding you.

And look at verse 17. Verse 17 is unusual. He says, how precious to me are your thoughts, O God. One commentator says, what David means here is how precious are your thoughts, O God, about me.

He says, God, when I think of the way that you carry me on your heart, it blows my mind. How vast is the sum of them? God, it's not just a fleeting thought you have. God, you think about me, you carry me on your heart continuously.

If I were to count all your thoughts, there would be more than the sand. I'm awake and I'm still with you. He says, God, it's like a dream. I can't imagine this as possible.

I wake up and it's still true. You care about me. You know about me. Every detail of my life. Psalm 139 tells us the sovereign God is sovereignly involved and cares about every intimate detail of our life.

[23:28] Now, God's word always has a purpose. The purpose for God's word is not just to fill our minds with information so that we say, okay, that's good.

God's word is always meant to change us. It's meant to impact us and to influence us. So how is God's good word of Psalm 139 meant to impact us? Well, one of the ways that we should not respond to it is by God's grace should not make us more self-centered and self-absorbed.

Okay? Remember Augustine, the great theologian from the 4th century, he said, one of the problems with humanity is our sinful nature makes us curved in on ourselves. We always look at life through a me lens.

We always tend to think about how life through the lens of my own life and myself. And that's the problem with the current narrative in our world.

Our world tells us just to satisfy yourself, pursue your own happiness, find meaning in yourself. But the problem is, it's just encouraging us to become more and more introspective and self-absorbed.

[24:33] And the problem is, we never become free from ourselves. But God's grace is different. God's good kindness to us doesn't exasperate the problem and make us more self-absorbed.

It should lead us to God and open us up to become more God-aware and to free us from our self-absorption. God's grace and kindness are different to the modern self-help books.

God's grace and kindness is not meant to reinforce our self-obsession, but to free us from it. One of the things that God's grace does is to deliver us from ourselves and help us to love and treasure God more.

And that's what we see here. God's amazing kindness and tenderness and sovereign goodness to David doesn't pander him so that David wallows in self-absorption, thinking, look how wonderful I am.

Even God thinks I'm amazing. That's not the point. It actually turns David outward from being absorbed about himself to now being astounded by God. God's sovereign care draws David into God.

[25:38] And so look at verse 19 to 22 with me. He says, Oh, that you would slay the wicked, O God. You men of blood, depart from me. Then he talks back to God.

God, they speak against you with malicious intent. Your enemies take your name in vain. God, do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord? Do I not loathe those who rise up against you?

I hate them with a complete hatred. I count them my enemies. Now, it's a different tone here, right? The first 18 verses are like amazing.

God, you know me, you care about me, you're so tender and wonderful. And then you get to verse 19, you're like, huh? I've got a confession. This week when I was preparing for this, I was using an old Bible of mine, one that I got in university.

And the first 18 verses are underlined and highlighted and there's notes in the margin. It's like amazing. And verses 19 to 22 are conspicuously bare.

Obviously, I didn't like them so much when I had that Bible for the first 10 years. What's going on here? The Bible is full of this actually. And if you think about it, it makes sense.

Friends, do we not all rise up and defend and protect that which we love? If you love something or you love somebody and then somebody else comes and offends or denigrates or insults what you love, how do you feel about it?

Don't you take offense? Doesn't it rile you? We don't just keep calm and carry on, right? Passion and anger can be an expression of selfishness if the things that we get angry about are when things don't go our own way.

But they can also be an expression of love. The thing that you get passionate and angry about shows what you love the most, right? If somebody offends or abuses or insults your wife or your sister or your child, what do you do?

You don't just stoically carry on. No, even the most timid person becomes a lion. They get riled. They get angry about that and rightly so. Right? Because the enemies of those that you love in a way become your enemies.

[28:01] You don't just lie down and take it lying down. You stand up. In Psalm 69 David says something similar. He says, zeal or passion for your house consumes me, O Lord.

And the insults of those that have fallen on you fall on me. David says, God, when people insult you and blaspheme your name, I take it personally. I get riled and get angry about it because I love you, God, and I hate seeing people treating you like that.

And that's what David, that's what's going on here. David expresses this outrage, this anger at those who call themselves followers of God but then blaspheme his name, murder others, kill others, and act unjustly.

He says, God, your enemies take your name in vain. Therefore, I count them as my enemies. I get angry about it. Friends, how do you know that you love God and that God's grace has changed your life?

One of the ways you know is that you love what God loves and you hate what God hates. You see that? The immensity of God's sovereign grace and care, God's sovereign awesomeness and his amazing grace for us is meant to so draw us into him that now it changes our lives and now we start to love what God loves and we hate what God hates and our lives start to get orientated around God except that's not the only thing that God's grace does.

[29:30] God's grace draws us into him so that we center our lives around him but it does something else as well. You see, God's grace to David has caused him to hate the evil and the wickedness that he sees in the world.

He sees this injustice and he says God, there's something wrong about this. He sees corruption in the church and he says God, it should not be like that. But the problem is one of the things the gospel tells us is that the problem with the world is not just out there, is it?

It's also in here. In the words of G.K. Chesterton, what's wrong with the world? I am. I am. You see, the wickedness and the problem and the hypocrisy and the brokenness of the world is not just on Wall Street or, you know, Peter Street or the big banks or institutions or politics or the education.

It's actually in my heart. It's my self-absorption. It's my self-righteousness. It's my bigotry. It's my selfishness. And so look at what David, what God's grace does to David here.

It doesn't just cause David to hate the wickedness out there, but the wickedness within. In other words, God's grace doesn't just make you passionate, it also makes you humble.

[30:47] And so look at how David ends this psalm in response to God's amazing kindness and care. Verse 23, Search me, O God. Know my heart. Try me and know my thoughts.

God, even my most private and intimate thoughts, I'm opening them up to you. God, if there is any grievous way in me, literally any idle, loving way in me, O God, come and change me.

Lead me back to your path, the way of everlasting life. Let me ask you a question. What do you do when you feel insecure, when you feel threatened, when you feel unsure about how somebody's going to treat you?

Typically, we close up, right? We close down. We don't share too much information. We make sure that we're not too vulnerable with those that we feel insecure about.

But what do you do when you feel 100% safe with somebody? What do you do when you feel 100% secure with somebody? When you know that somebody's only ever got your best interest at heart?

[31:49] When you know that what you share with them is going to be kept 100% in confidence? They're not going to share it with anyone or use it against you. What do you do? You open yourself up. You're willing to be vulnerable with them.

You let them into the most intimate and secret places of your heart, right? Friends, the story of the Bible is that the sovereign God who made the galaxies and the cosmos and everything about us, the God who knows every single thing about you, the best about you and the worst about you, the one who knows you even better than you know yourself.

Do you know what he did with that information? He went to the cross and he took the fall for you and that changes us because now we can live for him but now we can also be secure enough to open our lives up to him.

Friends, the God of the Bible, the one who knows you is the safest being in the whole universe and because he knows everything there is to know about you and he won't shame you and he won't belittle you and he won't mock you but rather he treats you with unbelievable kindness, that doesn't lead us to become more self-absorbed or more self-focused or closed up, it leads us to say, God, my life is in your hands.

Come and have your way. Friends, Christ's immense grace and love and care for you gives you such an immense security it should lead us to say, okay God, I know that with you I'm in safe hands.

You're not gonna ride of me, you're not gonna take advantage of me. Here's my life, have my way. God, come and have your way. Search me, oh God. If you see anything in my life that grieves you, come and change my life.

Change the trajectory, change the path that I'm on. God, lead me to your path, the path of everlasting life. Friends, do you know God like this? Have you opened yourself up to him?

Friends, do you ever feel alone and misunderstood, overlooked? Do you sometimes feel that nobody cares about you? Nobody knows you?

Do you sometimes worry if the anxieties in your heart you carry them alone? That nobody understands what you're going through? Do you find it difficult to be vulnerable and real, to let people in?

Friends, there is a God, the one who knows you better than you know yourself, who loves you more than you love yourself. And he's already paved the way for you to open yourself up, to let him in, that he can lead you the way of everlasting life.

[34 : 26] Let's pray together. Oh, Heavenly Father, thank you for this amazing psalm, God. It's a psalm that is very famous. We sing about it, we talk about it, we discuss it throughout the ages.

But God, when we stop to think about it, it is such good news. That God, you know us and you care for us. God, thank you for the good news of your sovereign omniscience and yet your intimate care.

God, thank you for the good news that though you know us inside and out, what you chose to do with that was the most astounding thing. You went to the cross for us and you died for us to carry our shame, to carry our guilt, to carry the things in our lives, God, that nobody knows about and that we've sworn we'll never tell anybody about.

You know them and you carried it to the cross. God, I pray that this morning, Lord, that your sovereign grace and your perfect knowledge of us will lead us, God, to open up our lives and to trust our lives to you.

To not have to make life work on our own terms, but to come and to trust you. God, that you know this morning, if you have utiliser help, in this Toomer song, that you are also a free gem to use the auth generated and then you can take a closer look and see if you have it might be the one that's going to place a whole place because you can show a baby and the ahora have to it may be the whoever to bring it and use