

God's Promised Presence

Devotional Reading: [Exodus 33:12–23](#)

Background Scripture: [Psalm 139](#)

[Psalm 139:1–12](#)

For the director of music. Of David. A psalm.

- ¹ You have searched me, LORD,
and you know me.**
- ² You know when I sit and when I rise;
you perceive my thoughts from afar.**
- ³ You discern my going out and my lying down;
you are familiar with all my ways.**
- ⁴ Before a word is on my tongue
you, LORD, know it completely.**
- ⁵ You hem me in behind and before,
and you lay your hand upon me.**
- ⁶ Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,
too lofty for me to attain.**
- ⁷ Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?**
- ⁸ If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.**
- ⁹ If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
if I settle on the far side of the sea,**
- ¹⁰ even there your hand will guide me,
your right hand will hold me fast.**
- ¹¹ If I say, “Surely the darkness will hide me
and the light become night around me,”**
- ¹² even the darkness will not be dark to you;
the night will shine like the day,
for darkness is as light to you.**



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Key Text

You have searched me, LORD, and you know me.—**Psalm 139:1**

Worship in the Covenant Community

Unit 3: Psalms of Thanksgiving and Praise

Lessons 10–13

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. List the things that God knows based on **Psalm 139:1–12**.
2. Explain the imagery of light/dark and God's sight in this psalm.
3. Create a nightly reminder of God's loving care.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Human Limitation
- B. Lesson Context

I. Unsearchable Knowledge (Psalm 139:1–6)

- A. Complete Awareness (v. 1)
- B. Complete Insight (vv. 2–3)
- C. Complete Understanding (vv. 4–6)
Talk to Someone

II. Unavoidable Presence (Psalm 139:7–12)

- A. In Space (vv. 7–10)
To Be Known by God
- B. In Darkness (vv. 11–12)

Conclusion

- A. God’s Presence and Knowledge
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

How to Say It

Ignatius	ig- <i>nay</i> -shus.
merism	<i>mare</i> -izm.
omnipresence	<i>ahm</i> -nih- prez -ence.
omniscience	<i>ahm</i> - <i>nish</i> -untz.

Introduction

A. Human Limitation

The progress of technology has facilitated an interconnected world. The sheer volume of information that is available thanks to the internet is staggering. But the wealth of knowledge also serves as a reminder of humanity’s limitations in experiencing every corner of the globe within a single lifetime. Visiting every country might seem possible. But with approximately 4 million cities and towns across the globe, we realize that just seeing a country will not give us the experience of all those varied places—let alone lightly or uninhabited regions.

Moreover, humanity has only begun to explore the vast expanse of space and the depths of the oceans. In this regard, when we consider the smallness of our plot of land on earth compared to the vastness of space and the oceans, we are reminded of humanity’s limited ability to explore. In today’s lesson, the psalmist offers insight into this.

B. Lesson Context

Although one ancient manuscript ascribes [Psalm 139](#) to a man named Zechariah (not the prophet) sometime in the 700s–600s BC, most scholars accept the traditional attribution to David. According to Scripture, David was a man who sought after the very heart of God ([1 Samuel 13:14](#)), exemplified by his demonstration of faith when he faced Goliath ([17:47](#)). He was a man of integrity who chose to trust in God when presented with an opportunity to kill Saul in a cave ([24:8–10](#)). Even after conquering his enemies and receiving the promise that his kingdom would be established forever, David remained humble ([2 Samuel 7:18](#); see commentary on [Psalm 139:5b](#), below).

Several difficulties confront us when reading this psalm. First, there is no reference to a particular historical circumstance. This means that a specific historical context, even in David's life, cannot be determined. Context is a great help in interpretation, so the questions presented below reflect to some degree the question of the context of this psalm's being written. Second, a thorough examination of [Psalm 139](#) reveals complexities in its structure that complicate a straightforward interpretation of David's intent.

To analyze the psalm's content, some scholars have proposed dividing it into sections of praise (vv. [1–18](#)) and lamentation (vv. [19–24](#)) based on the initial expressions of gratitude followed by anguish. These can further be broken into four stanzas of verses [1–6](#), [7–12](#), [13–18](#), and [19–24](#). These issues also prevent this psalm from fitting neatly into conventional categories of psalms, which, when clear, can also aid in understanding ancient texts.

And finally, the text assumes that David was beset by wicked adversaries opposed to him and to God. These individuals harbored animosity toward God, profaned his name, and spoke maliciously against him ([Psalm 139:19–22](#), not in our printed text). Furthermore, David implored God to probe his innermost being and guide him toward eternal life ([139:23–24](#), not in our printed text). But the connection between the verses we will study today ([139:1–12](#)) and these opponents is unclear, and how early lament or protest begins is also hazy.

I. Unsearchable Knowledge

([Psalm 139:1–6](#))

A. Complete Awareness (v. 1)

1. You have searched me, LORD, and you know me.

This verse introduces a central theme of the chapter, which is further emphasized by its near repetition in the conclusion of this psalm ([Psalm 139:23](#), not in our printed text). God's complete knowledge, often referred to as his omniscience, is the attribute that encompasses his infinite awareness and understanding of everything that has ever happened, is happening, or will happen. He is entirely aware of all things. But David did not set out to write a doctrine of God's knowledge. David assumed God's omniscience as fact and did not make an argument to convince others. David's intention was not to teach about God's infallible, complete knowledge, but instead to marvel at it in awe and perhaps even in fear (see [139:7–12](#), below).

We might think of this verse as beginning a courtroom drama, with the *Lord* trying the evidence of David's character (*you have searched me ... and you know me*). The Hebrew word translated *searched* is the same expression employed to describe a cross-examination in a judicial context ([Proverbs 18:17](#)). God is the judge who has meticulously scrutinized and comprehensively understood all the evidence required to judge the heart's motivations.

What Do You Think?

How do you feel knowing that God knows you?

Digging Deeper

How can acknowledging the sinful parts of yourself that God already knows prepare you to grow by the Spirit's leading?

B. Complete Insight (vv. 2–3)

2. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar.

The psalmist employs the terms *sit* and *rise* to convey God's knowledge of an individual's entire day (see [2 Kings 19:27](#); [Psalm 44:21](#); [Ecclesiastes 12:14](#); [Hebrews 4:13](#); [1 John 3:20](#)). The two extremes point to God's total knowledge; nothing is left out. (The literary device of naming opposite ends of a spectrum to indicate everything in between is called *merism*.) Jesus' knowledge of people's inner lives is one marker of his divinity recorded in the Gospels (examples: [Matthew 12:25](#); [Luke 5:22](#); [John 4:16–19](#)).

3. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways.

The psalmist emphasizes that God possesses knowledge of both public and private aspects of one's life, from their travels (*my going out*) to their rest (*lying down*). The Hebrew term translated *discern* in context is an image of sifting grains to separate the grain from the chaff (compare [Ruth 3:2](#); [Isaiah 41:16](#)). This suggests God's metaphorically sifting David's life to separate chaff from wheat. A helpful analogy to clarify this notion involves likening the process to a gemologist who scatters an array of gemstones across a table, enabling the individual examination of each specimen for quality (compare [Jeremiah 17:10](#); see [Psalm 139:23–24](#), not in our printed text).

C. Complete Understanding (vv. 4–6)

4. Before a word is on my tongue you, LORD, know it completely.

In human communication, the potential for misinterpretation looms large. This is perhaps especially apparent in text-based media when we realize how much of comprehension comes down to nonverbal cues, such as tone and body language. Even when face-to-face, myriad factors can create misunderstandings no matter how carefully words are selected—not least the words *themselves*, which can have wide variations in meaning and are highly context-dependent. Given the perils of communicating even when both parties are acting truthfully, the risk of being deceived by a bad actor is always high (consider [Romans 16:18](#); [1 John 4:1](#)). In stark contrast, God possesses an unparalleled

ability to comprehend every *word* even when it is mere thought or intention. No context or body language confuses his understanding.

What Do You Think?

What other verses point to prayer as a gift to us rather than a need of God's?

Digging Deeper

What value can you discern in intentionally allowing prayers in the Bible to shape your prayer life?

Talk to Someone

As clients express themselves, counselors carefully listen to their words, observe their body language, and assess their emotions. Therapists' training and experience allow them to pick up on subtle cues and anticipate the direction of the conversation. By utilizing their well-honed intuition, insight, and expertise, counselors can help their clients make sense of their experiences, uncover underlying issues, and start on a road to healing and growth.

Therapists and counselors exemplify how we can strive to know and understand those around us more deeply. But even a well-trained therapist or counselor could be fooled; after all, they're still human! In contrast, [Psalm 139:4](#) emphasizes the all-knowing nature of God, who is aware of our every thought and word before we even speak to them. God knows us intimately, including our deepest thoughts and emotions. What comfort can you find this week in speaking to the Lord who knows you and loves you?

—O. P.

5a. You hem me in behind and before,

Here David's focus shifts from the pure fact of God's knowledge to the action he takes with this knowledge. *Hem ... in* is multifaceted, indicating an act of confinement, binding, or encircling. This can have positive or negative implications, depending on context. Most frequently, it denotes the plight of a city besieged by hostile forces ([Deuteronomy 20:12, 19](#); [1 Samuel 23:8](#); [Daniel 1:1](#); etc.). In one instance, however, the word is used by the beloved's friends: "If she is a door, we will enclose her with panels of cedar" ([Song of Songs 8:9](#)). A similar concept, though with a different word entirely, is used to describe God's protection of Job: "Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has?" ([Job 1:10](#)). The evidence suggests David was experiencing God's presence *behind and before* as a hindrance of some kind.

5b. and you lay your hand upon me.

The metaphor of God's *hand* might shed some light on the context of "hem ... in." Although God is an immaterial being and does not possess physical appendages such as hands or feet, the writers of Scripture were constrained by the limitations of human language in their attempts to depict God in a way that would resonate with their audience. There is precedent for desiring God to turn his attention to someone else, as communicated here with the metaphor of his hand. For instance, after eating the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden, the *last* thing Adam and Eve desired was an audience with the

Lord ([Genesis 3:8](#))! Job asked God to withdraw his hand ([Job 13:20–21](#)). And Ezekiel described God as striking his hands together to punish Judah ([Ezekiel 22:13](#)). Later, John the Baptist uses a winnowing metaphor to describe Jesus’ hand at work in judgment ([Matthew 3:12](#); see [Psalm 139:3](#), above).

We should not discount that David could have experienced God’s attention as being too intense for the man to bear (compare [Psalms 25:7](#); [32:4](#)). This psalm has no confession of sin—and, in fact, it asserts David’s blamelessness. But one wonders if God’s nearness was bringing to light what David would have preferred to leave in darkness. We might think of the time between his transgressions with Bathsheba and her husband and Nathan’s confrontation; David seemed to be living in denial of his sin ([2 Samuel 11:1–12:13](#); contrast [Psalm 51](#) [lesson 6]). This or a similar incident could account for wanting some space from God’s knowledge and presence. Far from experiencing God’s presence as an unmitigated blessing, David seems at least to struggle with the experience, if not to outright struggle *against* it.

6. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain.

This verse effectively conveys the profound distance between the positions of God and humanity (compare [Job 42:2–3](#); [Isaiah 55:9–11](#)). After contemplating the inscrutable nature of God’s mind, David concludes that God’s *knowledge* is far beyond the grasp of human comprehension. Rather than succumbing to despair, the psalmist portrays this phenomenon positively, evoking a sense of awe and amazement toward God. Furthermore, this reality leads the psalmist to acknowledge that he is “fearfully and wonderfully made” ([Psalm 139:14](#), not in our printed text).

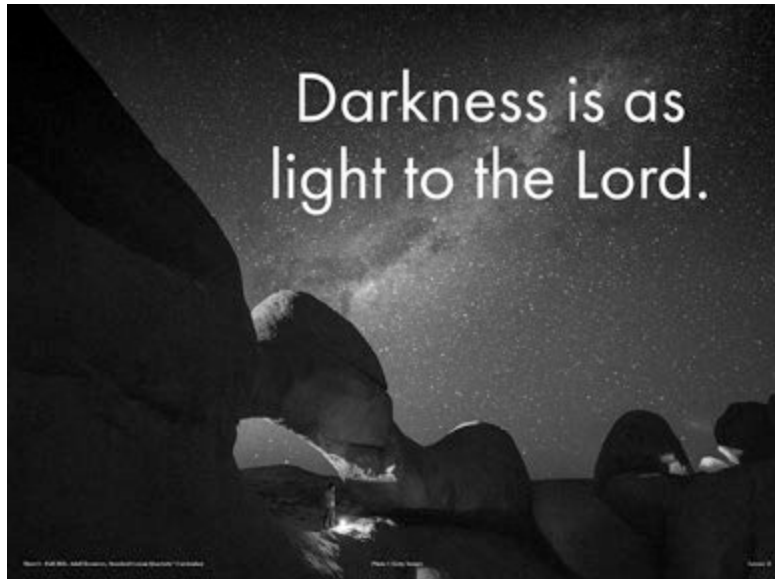
II. Unavoidable Presence

([Psalm 139:7–12](#))

A. In Space (vv. 7–10)

7. Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?

This verse marks the beginning of [Psalm 139](#)’s second stanza. This pair of questions can be read as an escape attempt (compare [Genesis 3:10](#); [Jonah 1:3](#)) or as an oblique acknowledgment of sin (compare Isaiah’s cry in [Isaiah 6:5](#)), praise, and adoration for God’s constant *presence* (compare [Psalms 16:11](#); [21:6](#); [51:11](#) [see lesson 6]; etc.), or some mixture of these. If the above reading of David’s having found God’s presence to be heavy is correct, then the first sense is most likely in view. David might have found God answering the king’s questions with some questions of his own: “‘Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them?’ declares the Lord. ‘Do not I fill heaven and earth?’” ([Jeremiah 23:24](#)).



Visual for [Lesson 13](#). Point to this visual as you pose the questions associated with [verse 12](#) for class discussion.

But even after fleeing from God, Jonah found relief in God’s ability to save even from “the deep,” considered to be the furthest place from God’s heaven (see [Jonah 2:2–6](#)). So we might assume that, though David felt God’s scrutiny too much, in the end, this would be a relief compared to a reality in which God was absent.

The portrayal of God’s omnipresence (presence everywhere) within this psalm is unique in the context of the ancient Near East. Most, if not all, other deities in the region were considered to have a limited, geographic sphere of influence (example: [1 Kings 20:28](#)). They were not expected to be present other than in the place where they reigned. This highlights a key difference between those so-called gods and the Lord: he reigns over and is present in all places, not to mention the fact that the regional gods are entirely fictional to begin with! This understanding substantiates that David’s writing stemmed from a deeply personal and intimate understanding of God rather than a mere appropriation of general religious concepts from nearby cultures.

8. If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

The word *if*, found five times in the English translation of [Psalm 139:8–11](#), indicates the hypothetical nature of the declarations that follow. The first two of those verses give examples of places where David could not physically go to flee from God’s presence (see [Psalm 139:9](#), below). *The heavens* are obviously a no-go, as that is God’s home ([1 Kings 8:30, 39, 43](#); etc.), and David couldn’t get there on foot in any case. In ancient Israel’s understanding of the world, multiple levels of heavens existed above the earth (see [Deuteronomy 10:14](#); [2 Corinthians 12:2](#)). This suggests that the contrast of heaven with *the depths* is another merism, where a combination of two contrasting parts refer to the whole. In this case, considering that the place of the dead was believed to be under the earth (example: [Numbers 16:30](#)), these two places are as far from one another as can be (compare [Job 11:8](#); [Isaiah 7:11](#); [Amos 9:2](#); etc.). David’s presence in either would not hide him from God.

What Do You Think?

How would you counsel someone who wants to trust God but struggles with the fact that he does not always intervene to prevent evil from occurring?

Digging Deeper

What assumptions about God and the world need to be confronted to face that question honestly?

9. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea,

In contrast to the vertical imagery of the previous verse, David shifts to horizontal imagery. *Wings of the dawn* is a poetic reference to sunrise, which happens in the direction east. *The sea* refers to the Mediterranean Sea, which lay to the west of Israel. Taken together, we see another merism as David describes going as far east as possible and as far west as was known. Hence, the depicted imagery expresses God's abundant presence, extending as far as the distance between the east and the west (compare [Psalm 103:12](#)). What David instinctively knew the prophet Jonah would find out the hard way when he was told to go east to Nineveh but tried to flee by going west to Tarshish ([Jonah 1:1–3](#)).

10. even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.

Having established the hypothetical situations of the previous two verses, David identified two comforting actions linked to God's omnipresence. First, David could be guided by the *hand* of God regardless of David's location. This assurance was grounded in the understanding that one is never in a place where God cannot provide guidance (example: [Psalm 23:4](#) [[lesson 10](#)]).

Second, David asserted that one cannot be beyond the reach of God's protection and salvation, as exemplified by the phrase *right hand will hold me fast* (compare [Psalms 18:35](#); [21:8](#); [63:8](#)). This assurance brought comfort to David, who had in mind his adversaries who sought to do him harm ([139:19](#)).

What Do You Think?

In which current situations do you find God's presence in your life comforting?

Digging Deeper

Do you find his presence alarming in others? Does this suggest that a new course of action would be wise for you?

To Be Known by God

Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556) was the prominent founder of The Society of Jesus (the Jesuits). He authored a book titled *The Spiritual Exercises*, which focused on spiritual development. The book emphasized the importance of respecting and serving God as the sole Creator and supreme Lord of the universe.

Ignatius's teachings on the omnipresence of God were encapsulated in a section of his book called "Principle and Foundation," which serves as the fundamental basis for the spiritual exercises. Ignatius drew insight from [Psalm 139](#) regarding this. His interpretation of this passage is that our purpose in life is to be known by God, who is present in every situation.

We relate to God in (at least) three ways: as our Creator, Ruler, and Redeemer. God is omniscient (all-knowing) and omnipresent (present everywhere) in these aspects of his nature. What behavior or

thought process do you need to change personally to better acknowledge this fact?

—O. P.

B. In Darkness (vv. 11–12)

11a. If I say, “Surely the darkness will hide me

David introduces another conditional statement; the *darkness* here is figurative (metaphorical). Darkness characterizes the time when thieves are prone to operate (Job 24:16). Thus, this “if” statement fits David’s previous questions about attempted concealment.

11b–12. “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.

These conclusions all speak to the futility of trying to hide anything from God. Even opposites such as *darkness* and *light* make no difference to God’s knowledge of David’s physical and spiritual locations and status. The metaphor of God’s illuminating presence is continued in the New Testament and is ascribed to Jesus Christ (see John 1:4–5; 3:19–21; etc.).

What Do You Think?

What darkness would you like reassurance that God sees through?

Digging Deeper

What difference does it make that Jesus has been revealed as the light of the world, which the world cannot understand (John 1:5, 9–10)?

Conclusion

A. God’s Presence and Knowledge

The vastness of the world’s information and the multitude of places yet to be explored can be exciting and terrifying; God’s boundless wisdom and presence provide solace to believers in either and all cases. Even if humanity were to one day journey to the surface of Mars, God’s omnipresence ensures that he is already there. For those who trust in him, the omniscience and omnipresence of God offer a sense of security and salvation. It is essential to recognize that God did not create the universe only to abandon it to its own devices. Rather, he is actively involved and present in every aspect of creation. There can never be too much to know for the infinite God.

David acknowledged his inability to comprehend all knowledge, which underscores the incomprehensibility of God’s omniscience. And it’s uncertain whether, in the writing of this poem, David was reassured or troubled by God’s full knowledge and relentless presence. But these characteristics certainly did comfort David in other cases.

Like David, we might find ourselves in a situation when God’s knowledge and presence make us uneasy. Or we might unreservedly embrace these attributes as comforts in our present circumstances. In either case, we can strive to know God better and to praise him, offer him our confusion and anxieties, and ask him for help against all the evil we confront.

B. Prayer

All-knowing and all-present God, we lift our hearts to you. May we take comfort in knowing that you are always with us and will never be surprised by anything we think, say, or do. Help us glorify you in all things so that your presence and knowledge are a comfort and not a warning to us. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Take comfort in God's unsurpassed knowledge and presence.

Involvement Learning

Enhance your lesson with [NIV Bible Student](#) (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the [NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition](#)).

Into the Lesson

Divide the class in half for a debate. The **Out Loud Team** will argue for the benefits of having no personal secrets; the **Hush Team** will argue for the benefits of keeping one's secrets. Allow a few minutes for the debate teams to jot down their ideas before asking for opening statements, rebuttals, and final statements.

Instead of declaring a winner, ask the two halves to discuss in their own group what they thought were the ideas with the most merit from the other side. Then bring the class back together to discuss what ideas they found most compelling from both teams.

Lead to Bible study by saying, "We know we don't have any secrets with God. Is that always reassuring? Today's psalm leaves room for us to be both comforted and frightened by God's knowledge and presence."

Into the Word

Ask a volunteer to read [Psalm 139:1–12](#) out loud. As learners listen, have them jot down reasons this is a *comforting* psalm. Ask a second volunteer to read the lesson text one more time so learners can list reasons it is a *frightening* psalm. In pairs (or small groups), ask learners to discuss the reasons they heard for comfort and fright in this psalm.

Next, have the pairs consider whether the psalm is *either* comforting *or* frightening or if it can be *both* comforting *and* frightening. Encourage learners to cite verses in [Psalm 139](#) that support their answers, as well as other evidence from the Bible. After a few minutes, bring the class back together to discuss their thoughts. *Note:* the class need not reach a consensus about this psalm in order to have a

fruitful conversation.

Alternative 1. Distribute the “Known by God” exercise from the activity page, which you can download, to be completed as indicated in small groups. After calling time, ask volunteers to share their work. Allow time for class discussion.

Alternative 2. If your class has artistically inclined learners, ask them to work in small groups to create visual representations of the scenes in which the psalmist cannot escape God’s presence. These can be individual scenes (if they want to be more detailed) or longer comic-striptype images if they work alone. As they work, have them discuss how such pictorial interpretations can be used to teach children and adults alike about God’s presence. Encourage these learners to share their work with someone outside of class and come to class next week prepared to share about that experience. Allow time for volunteers to share their work with the whole class.

Into Life

In learners’ original pairs, have them brainstorm the implications of God’s presence in a world that we see contains much evil. Ask them to consider what barriers to and opportunities for evangelism God’s presence poses.

Distribute slips of paper and pencils. Display the following phrase: “Something most people don’t realize about me, but I’m glad God does ...” Ask students *anonymously* to jot down a response to this prompt. Collect the slips of paper and then redistribute them among the class members. Ask volunteers to read what’s written on the slip they receive.

Alternative. Point students to the second exercise “Read and Reflect” on the activity page, to be completed as indicated.

After either activity, give learners one minute to silently reflect on what would be a meaningful nightly reminder of God’s loving care. Ask volunteers to share their ideas. Encourage learners to create this reminder and place it somewhere it will be visible before learners go to sleep. Close class with a prayer.

To print the reproducible activity page, simply click the highlighted text below to create a pdf file on your hard drive. Then open the pdf file in Acrobat Reader and print.

[Activity Page \(November 24—God’s Promised Presence\)](#)
