

August 17, 2025

GOD'S GREATNESS: PSALM 139:1-4,7-16

Introductory Activity Option 1 (Adapted from ETB LG, 123)

Prepare: Prior to the session, make copies of Pack Item 9 (*Handout: Organizing the Psalms*). Hang Pack Item 6 (*Poster: The Nature of God*) on a focal wall.

Ask: Why is it important to know your purpose in life? What happens when you don't? (PSG, p. 104)

Read: Direct a volunteer to read the opening paragraph on page 104 of the PSG as the group considers the purpose God has for their lives. (Anyone who has given instruction to teenagers has likely been asked some form of this question: "Why do I need to know this?" They want to know its purpose for their lives. Having a sense of purpose is fundamental to all human beings. The reason for this is that God made us for His purposes—that we might love, serve, and glorify Him. In Psalm 139, David expressed his amazement over this wonderful truth.)

Share: Command the digital voice assistant on your phone to find the answer to a question or to tell a joke. Point out that technology makes it easy to uncover some information or to get answers to certain questions. But questions of "why?" often require more than our phones can provide.

Context: Note that David had questions, and Psalm 139 offers a testimony of what God taught him as he sought answers.

Transition: David found a lot to be thankful when it came to God's work in his life. The first thing he identified related to God's character, especially the fact that He knew him so well.

Introductory Activity Option 2

Prepare: "Hand Pack Item 6 (*Poster: The Nature of God*) on a focal wall." (ETB LG, 123)

Ask the group to name some attributes of God. (Allow time for discussion. You will probably hear answers like loving, forgiving, merciful, etc.)

Explain: Today, we will explore Psalm 139. Some parts of this psalm will be familiar, like verses 13-14. These verses detail God's role in the creation of each individual and the sanctity of human life. We should note that while Psalm 139 deals with humanity, it is chiefly concerned with the Lord. In this psalm, David asks some questions, and in the answers to those questions, he discovers some chief attributes of God. (Draw attention to Pack Item 6 *Poster: The Nature of God*) Today, we will learn about three essential characteristics of God. We will see that He is All Knowing (omniscient), All Present (omnipresent), and All Powerful (omnipotent). In

Notes:

This Lesson was created using:

- *Explore the Bible Leader Guide* (ETB LG)
- *Explore the Bible Personal Study Guide* (ETB PSG)
- *Explore the Bible Commentary* (ETBC)
- *Preaching the Word: Psalms Vol 1* (Preaching Vol 1)
- *Preaching the Word: Psalms Vol 2* (Preaching Vol 2)
- *Exalting Jesus in Psalms 1-50* (Exalting 1-50)
- *Exalting Jesus in Psalms 101-150* (Exalting 101-150)
- *Exalting Jesus in Psalms 119* (Exalting 119)
- *Two Horizons OT Commentary: Psalms* (Two Horizons)
- *New American Commentary: Psalms 73-150* (NAC)

discovering these three truths, we can be reminded that "Because God has made us, He knows us personally and is with us always." (ETB LG, 121)

1. HIS KNOWLEDGE (PSALM 139:1-4)

Read or have someone read Psalm 139:1-4.

Explain: Before we get into these verses, we should address the importance of what we are going to learn today. It is said that Mark Twain once quipped, "Don't use a five-dollar word when a fifty-cent word will do." Words like omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence sound like "five-dollar words" that are too "theological" for the everyday person. While the words may be technical, the concepts are essential for every Christian to understand. "Theology is the study of God, and as such, theology is no mere abstraction, but a relevant help to all of us." (ETBC, 112) In Psalm 139, David is going to ground these theological truths in the everyday, and he is going to help us understand what these truths about God teach us about ourselves. John Calvin, the sixteenth century theologian said, "Our wisdom insofar as it ought to be deemed true and solid wisdom, consist almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. (*Institutes*, 1960, 4)" (Exalting, 282) So let's dive in and see what David can teach us about God about ourselves.

Direct and define: The first thing we learn is that God is omniscient. Direct the group to the poster, *The Nature of God*, and read the definition of omniscience. (See notes box)

Ask the group to look back at verses 1-4 and call all the words or phrases that indicate God's knowledge.

Explain: Let's think about those and first understand **The Manner in Which God Knows**.

- In verse 1, David says that God has searched him and has known him. (**Write the words "searched" and "known" under omniscience on the poster.**) The word translated "[searched]" carries the idea of a tireless examination." (ETB LG, 124) The picture here is one of a thorough investigation that a prosecutor or defense attorney might undertake. The word translated "known" is similar and "indicates an intimate level of knowledge that results in a personal understanding of an individual." (ETB LG, 124) David is speaking to the Lord, and he acknowledges that God knows him intimately. In verses 2-4, David applies this truth to his life.
- In verse 2, David moves from the past tense to the present when he says that God knows and understands. (**Write the words "knows" and "understands" under omniscience on the poster.**) "The track record of God's intimate involvement in his life gave way to a testimony of His ongoing devotion that never wavers." (ETB LG, 124) God's *understanding* of David (and us) is a hands-on understanding. "The term describes the kind of knowledge that comes from first-hand

Notes:

Orthodoxy leads to orthopraxy—
right belief leads to right living.

Omniscience

"This means that God is all-knowing. There is nothing He doesn't know about us or our circumstances. As a result, nothing that happens catches Him by surprise."

observation: perception, touching, tasting, or hearing." (ETBC, 113)
God's understanding of David is not like a student who knows information from a science textbook. Instead, He knows David like a high schooler participating in the "lab" component of Biology 101—it's hands-on.

- In verse 3, David says that God observes and is aware. (**Write the words "observes" and "aware" under omniscience on the poster.**) The word "observes" carries the idea of winnowing. In Scripture, we think of winnowing as separating the wheat from the chaff. That is separating the good in our lives from the bad. "Observes" also contains the idea of sifting. Imagine working at an archeological dig site. The archaeologist will place dust and debris in a pan and shake it so that the dirt falls away and reveals the shards of pottery left behind. Through sifting, the archaeologist is about to observe what was below his feet all along. Likewise, God sifts our lives to "discover" the ins and outs, the good and the bad.

We should now look back and see **What God Knows**, understands, and observes.

- Reread verses 2-3. Here we see that "God knows your character." (Exalting, 284) (**Write the word "character" under omniscience on the poster.**) In a series of opposites, David reveals that the Lord's knowledge is intimate. He knows the private life of the believer as he or she sits. He knows the public life of the believer as he or she stands up to go out. (c.f. NAC, 552) Character might be described as what a person does when no one is watching. David makes it clear that God is always watching, even when he is far away or traveling.
- **Apply:** While this might sound or seem intrusive or even scary to some, that should not be the whole of it. In what ways might it be encouraging to the believer that the Lord knows his character intimately? (Allow time for answers. If they are not mentioned, you might want to reinforce two points. (1) While some people might misread or misconstrue our intentions, we should know that the Lord is intimately aware of the why behind our actions. (2) The Lord loves the believer and wants the best for him or her. Even though He knows our flaws, He wants the best for us and seeks to mold us into Christlikeness.)
- Reread verse 4. Here we see that "God knows your conversation." (Exalting, 284) (**Write the word "conversation" under omniscience on the poster.**) Within one day, our conversations can sometimes be peppered with positive words and phrases as well as negative words and phrases. The Lord knows all about it before we even begin to speak.
- **Apply:** While this truth might make us squeamish at times, it can be an encouragement. Why might this make a person squeamish? Why might it also be an encouragement? (Allow time for answers. If they

Notes:

Psalm 19:13-14

13 Moreover, keep your servant from willful sins; do not let them rule me. Then I will be blameless and cleansed from blatant rebellion.
14 May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, LORD, my rock and my Redeemer.

are not mentioned, you might want to reinforce two points. (1) The fact that God knows our conversations and even our private words before we speak can make us squeamish because often our words or the content of our speech are not edifying. They can be profane, hurtful, prideful, and even slanderous. (2) The fact that God knows our conversations and even our private words before we speak can be encouraging because the Lord can help us maintain Christ-like speech. David understood this when he wrote Psalm 19:13-14.) (Read Ps 19:13-14; see Notes Box)

Summarize Transition: In this passage, David applies God's divine omniscience to the individual. He puts God's all-knowing ability "into an understandable human expression, as the psalmist translates abstract theology into concrete language." (NAC, 552) God knows us A-Z, and this truth reminds us that "Believers can praise God for His knowledge of them." (ETB LG, 125)

2. HIS PRESENCE (PSALM 139:7-12)

Read (or have someone read) Psalm 139:7-12

Explain: In the previous passage, we saw that God knows us intimately. Verses 2-3 reveal that He knows our character, and verse 4 reveals that He knows our conversation. We skipped over verses 5-6, which reveal "God knows the entire course of our lives." (Exalting, 284)

Direct and define: The second thing we learn about God's nature in this psalm is that He is omnipresent. Direct the group to the poster, *The Nature of God*, and read the definition of omnipresent. (See notes box)

Explain: David expresses this truth by first asking two rhetorical questions.

Reread verse 7 as "the group considers how they would answer David's questions." (ETB LG, 127) (7 Where can I go to escape your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?)

Ask: "Would your answer be the same for both questions? Where do you think people today go to escape God's presence?" (ETB LG, 127) (Allow time for answers.)

Explain: Sometimes we just want to escape the world. We go on vacation, or we head to our favorite fishing spot. These actions can be restorative and good for our mental and emotional health. However, sometimes, as believers try to get away from the conviction of the Spirit. We might know something is lacking in their relationship with the Lord, and we might know the reason is sin (either a sin of commission or a sin of omission). The trouble with trying to "escape" from the Spirit is that the Spirit lives in us. We should not try to escape the One who wants the best for us. As C.S. Lewis wrote, "We can ignore, but we can nowhere evade, the presence of God. The world is crowded with Him. He walks everywhere incognito" (Letters to Malcom, 101 in Exalting, 287)

Notes:

Psalm 19:13-14

¹³ Moreover, keep your servant from willful sins; do not let them rule me. Then I will be blameless and cleansed from blatant rebellion.

¹⁴ May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, Lord, my rock and my Redeemer.

Omnipresent

"This means that God has the ability to be in all places at the same time. Unlike us, He is not limited by time and space. As a result, nothing can keep us from His presence."

Likewise, unbelievers try to escape from God. They do so in their work, in their hobbies, or addiction. As believers, we sometimes want to look down on the unbeliever for such actions. Instead of behaving this way, we should look beneath what psychologists call the “presenting problem” and seek to understand the spiritual aspect of the unbeliever’s actions.

Discuss: Sometimes we do not feel equipped to help people who are behaving in an unrighteous manner. We might understand that there is a spiritual component to their actions—they are running from God, but we do not know how to address it. When that is the case, we can pray for them. What are some specific ways you can pray for those who are trying to hide from God?

Explain: We can pray that the Lord will open their eyes to their situation. We can pray that the Lord will send the right person to them at the right time to counsel them. We can also pray that our churches will be open, welcoming places for those who are hurting, questioning, and seeking solace.

Pray: Take a moment to silently pray for friends, relatives, acquaintances, and neighbors who seem to be running from God.

Explain: There is another way to view David’s question, and this is a more positive way. To understand this more positive way of viewing David’s questions, let’s look at how he answers them. He does so through a series of opposing locations.

- First, David explores the vertical axis (Reread verse 8 and write “heaven” and “Sheol” on the poster under Omnipresent). Heaven implies the place of God’s presence, and Sheol generally means the place of the dead or even the place of the wicked after death. In effect, David is saying, “Living or dead, I cannot escape God.” (see notes box)
- Second, David explores the horizontal axis. (Reread verse 9 and write “east” and “west” on the poster under Omnipresent.) The phrase “wings of the dawn” represents the rising of the sun in the east. The “western horizon” represents the setting of the sun. Geographically, for an Israelite, the sun sets on the far side of the sea. Whether on travels to the East or roaming the West, the Lord is there.
- Third, David explores what we might call the chronological axis. (Reread verses 11 -12 and write “all the time” and “good times and bad” on the poster under Omnipresent). David continues the imagery of the rising and setting sun by addressing darkness and light. Day or night, God is present. Darkness here might also represent evil. Can the evils and trials of the world that overcome me separate me from the Lord? David says they cannot. Even in the bad times, God is there. In the darkness of night, God sees us. In the evil and trials of the world, the light of God’s presence shines through.

Notes:

Teaches Note: As I write this, I realize that some group members might question the presence of God in Hell. Isn’t that part of what makes hell, hell? David is speaking generally here. The point he is making is that we cannot escape the Lord

Explain: This brings us the positive understanding of David's initial question. "Where can I go to escape your Spirit?" Earlier, we looked at this question from the negative perspective—those seeking to escape the Lord. But David's answer presents the flip side of the question. This is revealed in verse 10 (reread verse 10). David reveals that wherever we are, whenever we are, or whatever we are facing, God will lead us and care for us. "When he does not see the way ahead, the Lord will lead him on the right way (cf. v. 24). When he is weak, the Lord will grasp him with this support and strength (cf. Ps 73:23-24)." (NAC, 554)

Pray: Some group members might feel far from God. Maybe it is due to their sin, or maybe it is due to the troubles of life. If anyone would like to share, allow them time to do so. If someone shares, pray for them specifically. If not, pray for the group generally. Ask the Lord to remind group members of His presence and guiding, uplifting hand.

Summarize and Transition: Whether a person is trying to hide from God or a person feels like God is hiding from them, the truth is that God is always there. He is waiting and wanting for us to turn to Him. Regardless of what we are going through, "Believers can be comforted by God's presence." (ETB LG, 127). We have looked at God's omniscience and God's omnipresence. Let's see what else David teaches us in this Psalm.

3. HIS POWER (PSALM 139:13-16)

Read or have someone read Psalm 139:13-16

Explain: As we have seen in the previous verses, David is attempting to explain theological ideas through his everyday experiences. God's knowledge is demonstrated in David's private and public life as well as his public and private speech. God's presence is explained by David when he says that He is present in life and death, east and west, good times and bad. In this passage, David applies God's power to his very existence.

Direct and read: Direct the group to the poster, *The Nature of God*, and read the definition of omnipotent. (See notes box). (**Write "creation" and "sovereignty" on the poster under Omnipotent**)

Explain: As we alluded to in the introduction, this passage deals with the divine act of creation. We also alluded to the fact that this Psalm is *about* God and *uses* human experience to express His greatness. Verses 13-15 reveal God's activity in the formation of each and every human being. We might be able to explain the development of a child from conception to delivery using biology. But what biology cannot reveal is the active and powerful God who "as the master Weaver...links all the 'loops' of human life and fashions them into a person in the mother's womb." (ETBC, 118) Each strand of the double helix that makes up our DNA was woven by God. Each ligament that connects our muscles to our bones was tightened and tied off by the Weaver. Each neuron in our brains was designed, fashioned, and placed by the Artist who had our personality in mind.

Omnipresent

This means that God is all- powerful. His power exceeds anything we can imagine. As a result, He remains in control of every situation we experience.

Discuss: How does the world cause us to question the beauty of our bodies and personality? How can the truth of God's activity in creating us encourage us?

Explain: We are "remarkably and wondrously made." While our experiences and decisions do mold our bodies and personalities as we grow, God initially formed us just the way He wanted us. We are not happenstance. We are not a quirk of our environment. Let us praise Him like David.

Not only are we created by a powerful God our lives are marked by His sovereignty. In verse 16, David writes, "Your eyes saw me when I was formless; all my days were written in your book and planned before a single one of them began." Some might read this and say that God has planned out the activity of our days or "predestined" our actions. That is not what David is saying in this verse. Instead, he continues with the theme of life. Just as God marked our beginning, He knows our ending. As believers, we should not fret about death. Short or long, our lives are known to God. Moreover, the time between life and death is meant to have meaning and purpose. "God uniquely made us in His image to glorify Him, that is, to magnify His goodness and to reflect His beauty. God created human beings in this remarkable and wondrous way in order to fulfill this noble cause. Consequently, God's creation of humanity in this way and for this purpose gives meaning and significance to every person, highlighting the sanctity of human life." (ETB PSG, 110)

Summarize and Transition: The world system wants us to believe that our birth is nothing but biology and the means by which a species can survive. David reveals that our birth is a masterpiece of God's design. Moreover, the world system wants us to fear death as the end of our existence. David reveals that our death is known by God, and those who place their faith in Christ have nothing to fear. Instead, they can know that their designer is waiting for them. The world system wants us to believe that there is nothing to life except existential angst, work, and a few moments of joy. David reveals that we exist for a purpose. Those who know Jesus and are led by the Spirit can find their true purpose in life. The Lord powerfully made us and powerfully keeps us, and "believers can be encouraged that God has purposely created them to serve Him." (ETB LG, 129)

CONCLUDE

In today's lesson, we saw that theology is not something just for scholars and pastors. The concepts of omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence apply to each person. The truths they express about God can encourage us. When we don't know what's best, we can know that God knows us. When we feel alone, we can know that God is present. When we feel put down or less than, we can know that we are the masterpiece of a powerful Creator. When we feel lost and aimless, we can know that God created us for a purpose.

Challenge

Reflect: Encourage adults to reflect on the second set of questions on page 112 of the PSG during the week. ["How should knowing that God purposely created you to serve Him impact the way you live this week?"] Challenge them to embrace God's intimate knowledge of them and His ongoing presence in their lives." (ETB LG, 130)