

Summer Sermon Series: Sing Unto the LORD

# “How Great Thou Art”

(Psalm 139)

## Introduction

➤ This morning begins our “Summer Sermon Series” for 2024. For many years now, we have used the summer months as an opportunity to study various topics or themes throughout the Bible. Last year we devoted the summer to preaching on the Minor Prophets (“Minor Prophet, Major Message”). The year before we looked at many well-known passages that are underscored with consecutively repeated words (“It’s Worth Repeating”). The summer of 2021 we preached through a series on spiritual disciplines (“Disciplines for Disciples”). Before that we studied commonly used sayings that are unbiblical (“Unbiblical Sayings”).

This year, we are planning on preaching through great biblical themes found in doctrinally sound worship songs – “Sing Unto the LORD.” As you are most likely aware, at Skyline, we are committed to preaching the Word of God. So, in this series, we will not be preaching through hymns or worship songs, but using great song lyrics (i.e., titles/lines/phrases) as the theme for these sermons.

➤ I want to begin this series with one of the most beloved and famous Christian songs. It is the hymn “How Great Thou Art.” In 2001, it was ranked by Christianity Today as second only to “Amazing Grace” as the greatest hymn of all time. This hymn was originally a Swedish poem written in 1885, by Carl Boberg, a 26-year-old Swedish minister, which (when translated) is called “O Mighty God.” It was later, in 1949, loosely translated and expanded to be the hymn “How Great Thou Art” by Stuart K. Hine. During the 1950’s the song was popularized by the Billy Graham Crusades as it was routinely sung by George Beverly Shea and Cliff Barrows.

O Lord my God! When I in awesome wonder Consider all the worlds Thy hands have made.  
I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder, Thy power throughout the universe displayed.

*Chorus:*

*Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to Thee; How great Thou art, how great Thou art!*

*Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to Thee: How great Thou art, how great Thou art!*

When through the woods and forest glades I wander, And hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees;  
When I look down from lofty mountain grandeur, And hear the brook and feel the gentle breeze:

And when I think that God, His Son not sparing, Sent Him to die, I scarce can take it in;  
That on the cross, my burden gladly bearing, He bled and died to take away my sin.

When Christ shall come with shout of acclamation And take me home, what joy shall fill my heart!  
Then I shall bow in humble adoration, And there proclaim, my God, how great Thou art!

➤ When thinking about this year’s summer sermon series, and starting this series with the renown hymn “How Great Thou Art”, my mind immediately went to Psalm 139.

**Psalm 139** ~ “<sup>1</sup>O LORD, you have searched me and known me! <sup>2</sup>You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. <sup>3</sup>You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. <sup>4</sup>Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O LORD, you know it altogether. <sup>5</sup>You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. <sup>6</sup>Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it.

<sup>7</sup>Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? <sup>8</sup>If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! <sup>9</sup>If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, <sup>10</sup>even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me. <sup>11</sup>If I say, ‘Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night,’ <sup>12</sup>even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you.

<sup>13</sup>For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. <sup>14</sup>I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. <sup>15</sup>My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. <sup>16</sup>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. <sup>17</sup>How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! <sup>18</sup>If I would count them, they are more than the sand. I awake, and I am still with you.

<sup>19</sup>Oh that you would slay the wicked, O God! O men of blood, depart from me! <sup>20</sup>They speak against you with malicious intent; your enemies take your name in vain. <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 complete hatred; I count them my enemies. <sup>23</sup>Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! <sup>24</sup>And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!"

➤ Most of this Psalm, written by King David, can be outlined with the three “omni’s” of God – God’s omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence. These “big words” are intended to explain great and precious doctrines about God. Simply put, the word *omni* is Latin for “all.” So, God’s omniscience declares Him as “all-knowing”; God’s omnipresence declares Him as all-present”; and God’s omnipotence declares Him as “all-powerful.”

To be sure, as it should be, the doctrines of God are ultimately incomprehensible to us – as the infinite mind of God cannot fit into the finite human brain. Creation is not equal to the Creator (not even close) as clay is not equal to the Potter (Is.29:16; 64:8; Jer.18:4-6; Rom.9:20-21). We who are mortal cannot fully grasp the One who is Immortal. We who are finite cannot fully grasp the One who is infinite. We who are created cannot fully grasp the One who is self-existing Creator. Those who think they fully understand “god” either have a shallow/superficial understanding of God, or have false god (which is idolatry).

**Rom 11:33** ~ “Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!”

**Ps 145:3** ~ “Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised, and his greatness is unsearchable.”  
[“*unsearchable*”; lit. there is no searching; unfathomable, beyond finding out]

**Ps 147:5** ~ “Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure.” [“*beyond measure*”; lit. without number; innumerable, infinite]

➤ Therefore, we study Scripture (biblical doctrine) not to gain complete understanding, but to gain more understanding – not to know God fully, but to know God more fully – so that we can increase our capacity to worship and glorify Him as God! A false understanding of God will lead to a false worship of God, and a shallow understanding of God will lead to a shallow worship of God. This is accomplished with a faithful study of Psalm 139, as we discover three points of doctrine and one (two-fold) point of application.

## 1. **God’s omniscience – God has PERFECT and exhaustive knowledge of all things (vs.1-6)**

➤ Only a Being that is infinite (space) and eternal (time) is capable of knowing everything. The doctrine of God’s omniscience teaches that God has perfect and exhaustive knowledge of all things – past, present and future. God’s omniscience not only encompasses His absolute and eternal knowledge of us, but also of all creation. He not only has supreme and comprehensive knowledge of the past and present, but also of all future actions (inactions), events and choices. He know only has perfect knowledge of “actual” future but also of all “possible” futures (opposed to the heresy of “Open Theism”).

✓ Illust: A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, "... [God] knows all that can be known. And this He knows instantly and with a fullness of perfection that includes every possible item of knowledge concerning everything that exists or could have existed anywhere in the universe at any time in the past or that may exist in the centuries or ages yet unborn.

God knows instantly and effortlessly all matter and all matters, all mind and every mind, all spirit and all spirits, all being and every being, all creaturehood and all creatures, every plurality and all pluralities, all law and every law, all relations, all causes, all thoughts, all mysteries, all enigmas, all feeling, all desires, every unuttered secret, all thrones and dominions, all personalities, all things visible and invisible in heaven and in earth, motion, space, time, life, death, good, evil, heaven, and hell.

Because God knows all things perfectly, He knows no thing better than any other thing, but all things equally well. He never discovers anything. He is never surprised, never amazed. He never wonders about anything nor (except when drawing men out for their own good) does He seek information or ask questions" (ch.10: "The Divine Omniscience").

➤ God's knowledge is absolutely comprehensive and absolutely incomprehensible to us (vs.6). The Psalmist declares not only the vast (exhaustive) knowledge of God, but also the intimate knowledge of God: *"O LORD, you have searched me and known me! <sup>2</sup>You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. <sup>3</sup>You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. <sup>4</sup>Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O LORD, you know it altogether"* (vs.1-4). God literally knows everything about us – from the mundane to the monumental! He knows what we think before we think it, and what we say before we say it. "Lord, you know everything about me – everything I do, everything I think, everything I plan to do, everything I intend to think."

**1 Cor 4:5** ~ "... [the Lord] will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes [*boulē*; motives, intentions] of the heart ..."

➤ Furthermore, David realized that even though God knows everything about him – every sinful action, inaction, thought, and attitude – God is immensely (undeservingly) gracious toward him as God protects Him and does not condemn him: *"You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me"* (vs.5; see Rom.5:1, 8; 8:1).

God is not duped into thinking that you and I are better people than we really are. God cannot be deceived (Gal.6:7). There is no scenario where God will "find something out about us" and change His mind about saving (forgiving) us. God will never say, "Wow, if I had known that about David I would have never promised him salvation." With full knowledge of the sinner's sinfulness (beyond what the sinner knows or remembers about himself), God offers salvation to all those who truly receive His Son (Jesus Christ) and their Lord and Savior.

➤ God's knowledge is perfect, which means there are no errors in His thinking, no holes in His wisdom, or "blind spots" in His counsel. Because God's knowledge is perfect, we know that He does not take risks or make mistakes. God does not learn, He does not guess, He does not forget, and He is never surprised. God has always known everything – His knowledge is infinite and eternal.

God knows absolutely everything about us. We cannot hide anything from God. He knows every seemingly little detail about our lives – even that which we have forgotten, and that which have yet to discover. Nothing escapes His all-knowing attention and nothing obscures His all-seeing vision. In Scripture we read that Jesus Himself declared that God knows what you need even before you ask Him (Matt.6:8), and that He knows the exact number of hairs on your head (see Matt.10:30). God not only knows your past, present and future, He knows what you are going to do and what you are going to say, and He fully knows your private thoughts, feelings, decisions and motives.

**1 John 3:20** ~ "... [God] knows everything"

➤ It seems as though, in contemplating God's omniscience, David's brain is about to explode: *"Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it"* (vs.6; Ps.145:3; Rom.11:33).

✓Illust: “I cannot grasp it. I can hardly endure to think of it. The theme overwhelms me. I am amazed and astounded at it. Such knowledge not only surpasses my comprehension, but even my imagination” (Charles H. Spurgeon; *The Treasury of David*; Ps.139:6).

## 2. God’s omnipresence – God is **FULLY** present everywhere at all times (vs.7-12)

➤The Bible teaches us that God is Spirit (Jn.4:24), not a physical or material being. Therefore, as the self-existing immortal Creator, God is not bound by time or space. There is no place that we can go that God is not already there. Furthermore, there is no place that we can go that God is not already *fully* there. That is to say, God’s presence is not fractured or parceled out all over creation (He is never only “partly” or “mostly” anywhere). God is simultaneously and fully present everywhere at all times.

*Psalm 139:7-12 ~ “Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? <sup>8</sup>If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! <sup>9</sup>If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, <sup>10</sup>even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me. <sup>11</sup>If I say, ‘Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night,’ <sup>12</sup>even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you.”*

➤The Psalmist recorded that God is instantly/simultaneously everywhere! Verse seven asks two similarly rhetorical questions. These questions essentially ask: “Where can a person go away from God?” The obvious answer is “Nowhere.” Like Adam and Eve, the sinner often thinks they can hide from God (see Gen.3:8-10; Jer.23:23-24). This is why many people avoid church – they wrongly think that if they stay away from church, God does not know what they are doing. That is simply, seriously, untrue.

➤In our English translation, verses eight through twelve gives four “*if*” (vs.8<sup>2x</sup>, 9, 11). This covers the height of “*heaven*” (vs.8), to the deepness of “*Sheol*” (vs.8), to “*the uttermost parts of the sea*” (vs.9) – the greatest heights and depths and breadths known to man!

But the Psalmist is not done trying to explain the amazing omnipresence of God. Not only is God everywhere, He sees everything. The fullness of God’s presence covers the globe, and all creation, and nothing is hidden from His sight: “*If I say, ‘Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night,’ <sup>12</sup>even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you*” (vs.11-12). Trying to hide from God is like a person covering their own eyes and thinking that no one can see them!

✓Illust: “As [God] is not measured by time, so He is not limited by place. ... God, because infinite, fills all, yet so as not to be contained in them, as wine and water is in a vessel. He is from the height of the heaven to the bottom of the deeps, in every point of the world, and in the whole circle of it, yet not limited by it, but beyond it” (Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God* [Minneapolis: Klock & Klock, 1977], p. 148).

**Jer 23:23-24** ~ ““Am I a God at hand, declares the LORD, and not a God far away? <sup>24</sup>Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him?” declares the LORD. ‘Do I not fill heaven and earth?’ declares the LORD.”

**Heb 4:13** ~ “And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.”

➤This means that secret sins on earth, are open scandals in heaven. Every act of sin – every sinful thought, word or action – is done before the divine presence of the holy God; as if it were done in the middle the sanctuary of a church. Any “private” or “secret” sin is just as visible to God as any “public” or “open” sin. No sin is hidden from God’s sight, or done outside of His presence.

This also means that you are never truly alone. God is not an “absentee landlord”; He is never away on vacation; He is never stuck in traffic; He is never “too busy” somewhere else. God is never too preoccupied with other events to make time for us. When we pray, His attention is not delayed or divided. That is, you don’t just get a fraction of God’s time or attention – whatever is leftover or not busy with other things. When you pray, you have God’s immediate and undivided attention.

**Matt 6:6** ~ “But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

- Even if you are in the most remote place on the planet, you have God’s immediate and undivided attention. Even if you are (from a human perspective) the most unimportant or insignificant person on the planet, you have God’s immediate and undivided attention. Even if God were doing a billion different things at once, you would still have His immediate and undivided attention (not one-billionth, or .000000001 percent of His attention). Granted, God’s “leftovers” would still be greater than anyone else could offer, and greater than we could imagine. But God has no “leftovers” – His presence is not parceled out in anything less than absolute divine fullness.
- ✓ **Illust:** “The doctrine of the divine omnipresence personalizes man's relation to the universe in which he finds himself. This great central truth gives meaning to all truths and imparts supreme value to all his little life. God is present, near him, next to him, and this God sees him and knows him through and thorough” (A.W. Tozer; *The Knowledge of the Holy* ; ch.14: “God’s Omnipresence).

### **3. God’s omnipotence – God has sovereign POWER and authority over all things (vs.13-18)**

- To declare God as omnipotent is to declare Him to be all-powerful (omni-potent). Technically, this does not mean that God can do anything – we know, from Scripture, that God cannot die (1Tim.1:17), He cannot lie (Heb.6:18; Tit.1:2), He cannot learn (1Jn.3:20), He cannot change (Mal.3:6; Jms.1:17), He cannot disown Himself (2Tim.2:13) – He cannot cease to be God, or be God and not God at the same time.

God’s omnipotence refers to His sovereign power and authority over all things. Or, to put it another way, God’s unrivaled might and the right to do whatever He wants (Ps.115:3; 135:6; Is.46:10; Eph.1:11). Nothing in all of creation stands outside of the scope of God’s control. There is not one molecule in the universe – not one dust particle, grain of sand, microscopic virus or spiritual force, entity, dominion – that is beyond God’s sovereign power and authority. God could not be God if He were not all powerful.

**1 Chron 29:10-13** ~ “Therefore David blessed the Lord in the presence of all the assembly. And David said: “Blessed are you, O Lord, the God of Israel our father, forever and ever. <sup>11</sup>Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours. Yours is the kingdom, O Lord, and you are exalted as head above all. <sup>12</sup>Both riches and honor come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and might, and in your hand it is to make great and to give strength to all. <sup>13</sup>And now we thank you, our God, and praise your glorious name.”

- To be sure, God’s omnipotence can be seen in the massive elements of God’s creation – the universe (both “known” and “unknown”), the galaxies, the constellations, the sun, moon, the mountains, oceans, rivers (etc.). This is undoubtedly what the hymn writer was thinking about when he wrote:

*O Lord my God! When I in awesome wonder Consider all the worlds Thy hands have made.  
I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder, Thy power throughout the universe displayed.*

- But God’s omnipotence is also seen in the intricate and delicate creation of a human life in the womb of his/her mother. *“For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother’s womb. <sup>14</sup>I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. <sup>15</sup>My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. <sup>16</sup>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. <sup>17</sup>How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! <sup>18</sup>If I would count them, they are more than the sand. I awake, and I am still with you” (13-18).*

➤ This is one of the greatest passages in Scripture regarding the sanctity of human life, as we see God's sovereign hands intricately involved in the creation and formation of a baby – *“you formed my inward parts”* (vs.13), *“you knitted me together in my mother's womb”* (vs.13). Clearly, the preborn baby is made by God and human life is established (by God) in the womb (not a fetus, an organ, or a blob of tissues). It is the all-powerful God who creates human life in the womb of a mother, even before the mother knows she is pregnant. There the preborn baby is *“fearfully and wonderfully made”* (vs.14) as all God's *“works”* are *“wonderful”* (vs.14).

Humans are unique (special) among all of God's creation, because they are the only creation made in the *“image of God”* (Gen.1:26-27; cf. Eph.4:24; Jms.3:9). God is the Creator of all human life, and every human being. Consequently, human life is sacred – even the preborn baby! When God created light, He simply declared, *“Let there be light”* (Gen.1:3). So it was for much of the first five days of Creation – God spoke and it came into existence (Gen.1:3-23). But when God made the first humans, He did not merely speak them into existence: *“the LORD God formed the man of dust [i.e., Adam] from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life”* (Gen.2:7) ... *“And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman [i.e., Eve] and brought her to the man”* (Gen.2:22). Since that day, God is the Creator of every human life in the mother's womb!

➤ While for some time the pregnant mother is unaware of her pregnancy (especially in Old Testament times), the preborn human life is never *“hidden”* (vs.15) from God. For God is the one who gives the preborn life (at conception), and *“intricately”* (vs.15) fashions the his/her body while in the womb.

Furthermore, the greatness of God's omnipotence is seen in the fact that He not only sees the preborn baby (*“your eyes saw my unformed substance”*; vs.16), but also ordained the days of every preborn's life – even before conception! – *“in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them”* (vs.16).

➤ The Psalmist is, once again, overwhelmed by the sovereign greatness of God, and the sovereign love of God: *“How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! <sup>18</sup>If I would count them, they are more than the sand. I awake, and I am still with you”* (vs.17-18).

✓ Illust: “The power of God is that ability and strength whereby He can bring to pass whatsoever He pleases, whatsoever His infinite wisdom may direct, and whatsoever the infinite purity of His will may resolve... As holiness is the beauty of all God's attributes, so power is that which gives life and action to all the perfections of the divine nature. How vain would be the eternal counsels, if power did not step in to execute them. Without power His mercy would be but feeble pity, His promises an empty sound, His threatenings a mere scarecrow. God's power is like Himself: infinite, eternal, incomprehensible; it can neither be checked, restrained, nor frustrated by the creature” (Stephen Charnock; quoted from A.W. Pink, *The Attributes of God*, p.49)

#### 4. Our response – We must pursue God's **GLORY** and godly obedience (vs.19-24)

➤ In the final stanza of this Psalm, we see a two-fold application: 1) We must pursue the glory of God, and 2) We must pursue godly obedience.

First, known as an imprecatory Psalm (i.e., to invoke judgment or a curse on one's enemies), we read the prayer: *“Oh that you would slay the wicked, O God! O men of blood, depart from me! <sup>20</sup>They speak against you with malicious intent; your enemies take your name in vain. <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 complete hatred; I count them my enemies.”* (vs.19-22). Such prayers are not wishing evil upon one's enemies, but resounding God's abhorrence and damnation of evildoers. They are a defense of God's glory, and a profession of allegiance to the holiness of God. This is to be a righteous indignation against the prevalence of evil in the world, and the rebellion and blasphemies against the name of God.

Second, David's prayer turned inward: *“Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! <sup>24</sup>And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!”* (vs.23-24). The prayer is not just for God to remove the evil from this world, but also to remove the

evil from within our own hearts. It is the hypocrite who shakes his fist at a sinful world, but does not mortify sin in their own lives.

This Psalm ends as it began – with a recognition of God’s omniscience: “*know*” (vs.1, 2, 4, 23<sup>2x</sup>), and God’s ability to exhaustively “*search*” (vs.1, 23; i.e., examine by searching) the hearts and minds of every person. David is not giving God permission – for God needs no permission from His creation to exercise His sovereign will over His creation. He is humbly submitting to God’s sovereignty, and asking God to “*try*” (vs.23; i.e., examine by testing) him so that he could repent of sin (see **1Cor.11:28**; 2Cor.13:5; Jms.1:2-4; 1Pet.1:6-7) – “*see if there be any grievous way in me*” (vs.24; “*idolatrous tendency*” [NET]; “*offensive way*” [HCSB]; “*hurtful way*” [NAS]; “*wicked way*” [KJV]).

➤ King David clearly knew the greatness of God, and he knew his own weakness and sinfulness. David knew that God’s greatness is established in His divine nature and character, and demonstrated in His divine attributes. Specifically, in these verses, David highlighted God’s holiness and justice in the punishing of evildoers, and God’s mercy and grace is forgiving the repentant sinner.

We cannot hide our sin from God, but God can forgive our sin (Lk.11:4; Eph.1:7; 1Jn.1:7, 9). As a repentant sinner, David knew that God would graciously “*lead [him] in the way everlasting!*” (vs.24) – which is, eternal life (see Jn.3:15-16, 36; 10:28; Rom.6:23; 1Jn.2:25; 5:13).

**Ps 130:3** ~ “If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?”

**Rom 5:8** ~ “but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (2Cor.5:21; 1Pet.3:18)

*And when I think that God, His Son not sparing,  
Sent Him to die, I scarce can take it in;  
That on the cross, my burden gladly bearing,  
He bled and died to take away my sin.*

## Conclusion

➤ Upon hearing and understanding the greatness of God, we cannot help but sing:

*Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to Thee;  
How great Thou art, how great Thou art!  
Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to Thee:  
How great Thou art, how great Thou art!*