

The Ever-Present Presence

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



TOGETHER
FOR JOY

Prayer of Illumination

Lord God, the Scriptures teach that your Word is quick and powerful, living and active, sharper than any double-edged sword, seeking out the place where soul is divided from spirit and joints from marrow. Your Word is able to pass judgment on secret thoughts and intentions of the heart. So God, shine your light on not only your Word, but upon us. Amen.

Background

Any small thoughts we have about God are blown to smithereens by *Psalms 139*. Here we see played out in real life God's ubiquitous presence and the limitations of human knowledge. In essence, *Psalms 139* puts us in our place—reminding us that we're not God, but we are God's beloved. Our Judeo-Christian faith leaves no room for Deism, some "Clockmaker God" who designs everything, and then walks away, moving on to the next project. Instead, we learn from *Psalms 139* that God is majestic and transcendent, intimate and immanent, all at the same time.

Psalms 139 is the most personal and introspective of all the Psalms—and really all of Scripture. In the first six verses alone, the psalmist speaks directly to God ten times and speaks of himself eleven times. Things appear at the surface to be very serene, but below the surface anxiety and danger are bubbling up. The psalmist is raw and unfiltered in this moment. The better angels of our nature also

wrestle with our inner demons. Enemies were threatening the psalmist's life. And so here he turns to God in prayer in a time of stress and vulnerability. Totally tapped into his mortality and God's immortality. So try to feel the underlying tension in this Psalm as it's read. Is God's inescapable presence a good thing or a terrifying thing? And when we discover who we really are in God's presence—are we good or are we flawed? The answer is a resounding "Yes." But at the end of the day, *Psalm 139* affirms that we can entrust our lives to God's loving care, through the dangers, toils, and snares of this life.

So let's hear now the Word of the Lord from:

Scripture: Psalm 139:1-24 (NRSV)

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
 you discern my thoughts from far away.
You search out my path and my lying down,
 and are acquainted with all my ways.
Even before a word is on my tongue,
 O Lord, you know it completely.
You hem me in, behind and before,
 and lay your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
 it is so high that I cannot attain it.

Where can I go from your spirit?
 Or where can 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 settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
 and your right hand shall hold me fast.
If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
 and the light around me become night,"
even the darkness is not dark to you;
 the night is as bright as the day,
 for darkness is as light to you.

For it was you who formed my inward parts;
 you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
 Wonderful are your works; that I know 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 beheld my unformed substance.
In your book were written
 all the days that were formed for me,
 when none of them as yet existed.
How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!
 How vast is the sum of them!
I try to count them—they are more than the sand;
 I come to the end—I am still with you.

O that you would kill the wicked, O God,
 and that the bloodthirsty would depart from me—
those who speak of you maliciously,
 and lift themselves up against you for evil!
Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord?
 And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?
I hate them with perfect hatred;
 I count them my enemies.
Search me, O God, and know my heart;
 test me and know my thoughts.
See if there is any wicked way in me,
 and lead me in the way everlasting.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – The Ever-Present Presence

Francis was on the run.

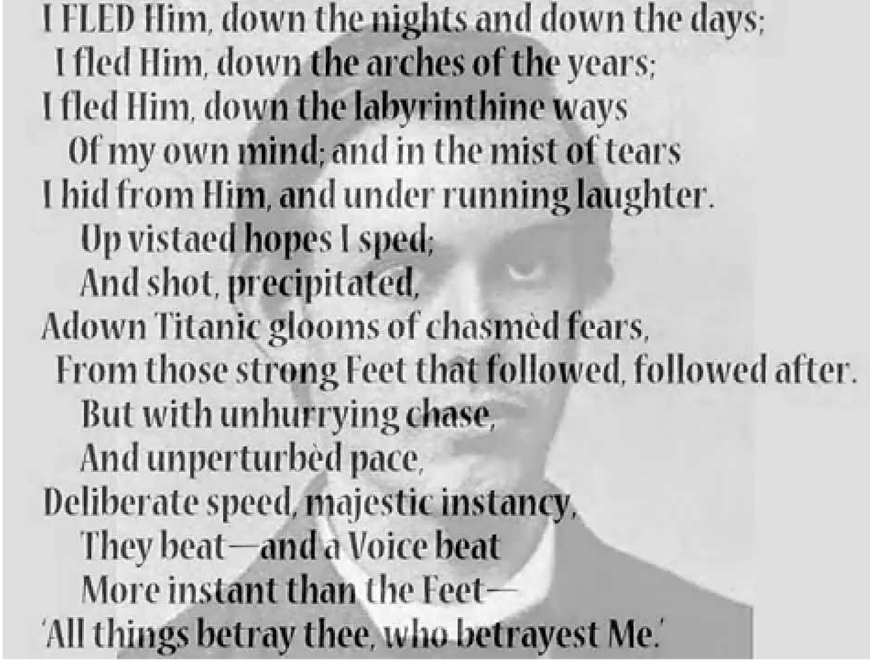
Running from his father,
Running from his failure as a medical student,
Running from God.
Running from himself.

Run, Francis run.

He ran to the slums of London. Ran into starvation, drug addiction and disease. With all this running, he finally hit the wall. Hit rock bottom—but God was even there, waiting. You see, Jesus loves us so much, he'll even go to hell to snatch us out of the flames.

In 1859, Francis Thompson was born into a well-to-do Roman Catholic home. His parents had big plans for him—that he be a physician. But it was a career he detested. He failed his exams three times and then fled to London. Then he failed every occupation he tried. Although his father sent a little money to him in care of a library, he was refused admission because he was disheveled and had a distinct smell.

When he collapsed in the street, a prostitute rescued him. Another friend brought Francis, ironically enough, to the care of a Franciscan religious community where he kicked his drug habit. But there was one thing he was unable to shake off—the Hound of Heaven nipping at his heels. And so the poem he scribbled on sugar paper became a classic:



I FLED Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.
Up vistaed hopes I sped;
And shot, precipitated,
Adown Titanic glooms of chasmed fears,
From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.
But with unhurrying chase,
And unperturbed pace,
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,
They beat—and a Voice beat
More instant than the Feet—
'All things betray thee, who betrayest Me.'

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Francis' story is also the story of human history, since the beginning.

- Adam and Eve tried to play hide and seek from God after eating the forbidden fruit. 'Come out, come out, from wherever you are!' And of course God found them.
- Job, feeling hounded by God, said: your hands made and shaped me like clay, but now none can rescue me from your grasp.

- God commanded Jonah to go to Ninevah, but he went in the exact opposite direction to Tarshish. Yet even in the uttermost parts of the sea—the Whale of Heaven swam and spit Jonah out to Ninevah where Israel’s enemies repented and found God—in a foreign land—far from the Holy Land!

We too both run from God and run to God. We can run, but we can’t hide! We feel God’s presence in different ways—comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable. God will not “let his people go” from his grip of grace.

Psalm 139 is part prayer, part journal entry. You’ve searched me O God, and you’ve sifted me. You know my resting and my rising, my workdays and my holidays, when I’m commuting or sheltering in place. You know my journeying, my wanderings, and my strayings. You keep vigil over me while I sleep, and there you are by my side when I awake. You get me, God.

In fact you know me better than I know myself. You can tell me things about myself that I didn’t even know. You know me through and through, inside and out.

You can only really know yourself, by knowing God.

His prayer continues:

You’re near to me God—closer to me than my own breath, nearer than my very own two feet and hands. You know what I’m going to say, before I use my words. Our God is Immanuel, God with us.

God knows us thoroughly—
our longings and cravings,
our hopes and dreams,
our fears and failures,
our pain and regret.

God not only knew us before we were born, but he already sees our future, yet to unfold. God created us, sustains us, knows us—and he still loves us. Warts and all, God is crazy in love with you, me, and us. Together—he loves the world and everyone in it. In fact, he loves us so much, he would die for us—and did die for us.

But we can’t get too cozy with God. God isn’t safe—but he’s good. God accepts us right where we are but he also doesn’t want to leave us as we are. Our good God wants to better us.

And so *Psalm 139* is an invitation to let our lives be an open book before God. To encounter and commune with our loving God. This is both exciting and scary because it involves change, shedding and sloughing off our old ways, even dying to them, and allowing our new self to flourish. This is a messy process.

Psalm 139 goes against our preservation instincts. There are corners of our lives we’d prefer just to hide. To remain untouched by God. In fact, God, can you give me a little more space? Some

breathing room? But the Hound of Heaven doesn't let us do that. So you might as well just drop your guard, raise the white flag, and surrender to God's love.

Jesus—take the reins.

It's a scary place, but we need not be afraid. God's got your back, He's got my back, He's got our back, Immanuel. Together. We're surrounded, hemmed in, besieged by God. Behind us and before us, there's no getting around him. Whether you go west, go east, or go north or south young man or woman—God is there, God is everywhere.

If I ascend to the heavens above—*you are there.*

If I'm all alone in the hospital—*you are there.*

If I descend into hell below—*you are there.*

For Christ went there for us and lived to tell about it.

Now there are times in life when God feels absent. Yet even in the absence, God is present. On cloudy and overcast days, we can't see the sun but we know the sun is still there. So it is with God—he's there, even when we feel alone. And God always sees us. You can't hide in the dark from God. God sees you in the daytime and in the nighttime. Dark and light are one in the same.

Our God is the One in Genesis One who spoke to the formless void and the deep darkness, saying "Let there be light" and there was light. And God saw the light that once was darkness and declared it was good.

You see, God created not only the cosmos, but you and me, from the dust of the earth. Or as the psalmist says, "I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made." Each of us—you, yes you! Don't look behind you—I'm talking about you! You were reverently, wondrously, strikingly, remarkably, differently made—in ways utterly beyond human comprehension.

The Scriptures teach that human life is sacred—from the womb to the tomb. And even when you're in the zoom room, feeling all screened out and like a zombie, you're still God's beloved.

Did you know God thinks about you all the time? You haven't slipped his mind. God never forgets you. God's thoughts toward you are good thoughts. His precious thoughts about you and every person who has ever existed are greater than the grains of sand on the seashore.

To wrap up his prayer, the psalmist comes back full circle to where he started:

"Search me God and know my heart and my mind."

Dare to live a God-examined life. Not just a self-examined life, but a God-examined life.

Make *Psalms 139* your prayer in 2021:

Come into my life God.

I open the door of my heart to you.

Sit and sup with me.

Search and sift me God.

Test me, understand my anxious thoughts.
God keep me flexible and malleable.
Teachable and open to change.

God wants you to stay open—no matter who you are. Be an open-conservative, an open-liberal, an open-moderate. Be humble—change and become like a child. Stay open.

Keep me on the right path. Help me course correct if I'm on the wrong path. Keep me moving forward. Cleanse me from petty hatreds. I pray for my enemies. Help me love them, not demonize or dog them. And let us all be centered in Christ, led by Christ, united in Christ. Rooted and grounded in God's love. That's the best way, the everlasting way, the ancient way—tried and true. That's a little bit of heaven, here on earth.

You see, Jesus is God's YES to all his promises—that he'll hold us fast, guide us throughout our lives, see us through our trials, and never let us go or leave us orphaned. And as we boldly go forth in mission—Christ is right there with us whether we're "in here" or "out there." We're always playing catch up to God.

I don't think anyone did a better job summing up *Psalms 139* than the Apostle Paul in *Romans 8*:

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? (And might I add plague?) No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen.

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