

## **Psalm 139 – I am still with you**

### **Introduction**

I don't know about you, but sometimes I just have to stop and process again how weird this moment in time is. Three months ago I was totally unfamiliar with the concept of "social distancing" – now it affects my life every time I step out of my house. We have become a social distant society. Some, I'm sure are loving the slower pace and working in their PJ's. But others are finding this moment in time a lonely road to walk.

In the middle of the lockdown, John Brogden, the chairman of Lifeline this:

*"In effect COVID-19's social distancing, isolation and lockdown restrictions are virtually ordering people to be lonely."*

The sad truth, however, is that Australia was experiencing widespread loneliness before Covid came on the scene. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare conducted a study on loneliness last year and found that 1 in 4 Aussies reported they were currently lonely, with 1 in 2 Aussies reporting they feel lonely for at least one day in the week.

For all our great technological advancements and material prosperity, we are a lonely country.

Well the author of our psalm tonight was a man familiar with loneliness too.

David was driven away from his friends and family by a jealous King out to kill him. David spent time literally hiding alone in a cave. In fact it was in that cave that he wrote the lonely words of Psalm 142 (v.4):

*Look and see, there is **no one** at my right hand;*

***no one** is concerned for me.*

*I have no refuge;*

***no one** cares for my life.*

Psalm 25:16 records another time of loneliness for David where he cries out to God:

*Turn to me and be gracious to me,*

*for I am **lonely** and afflicted.*

But despite his pain of relational absence David knew the glory of God's presence. And that's what we see in this Psalm tonight. David clings to the fact that God knows him, is with him, made him and will hear him in his distress. And that is actually the great hope we have as followers of Jesus – though we may be lonely, we are never truly alone. So let's think about the first part of David's Psalm.

**1. "You are the God who knows me" (vv.1-6).**

"Lord, *you* know me."

It's tough when we feel like people don't really know us. It's particularly tough when we feel like the people who *should* know us don't.

I remember speaking with a friend after his Dad gave the speech at his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday party and his comment was cutting: "that speech showed me just how little my Dad actually knows me."

But even those who do know us pretty well, may not really know our *deepest* fears, longings or temptations. David is telling us that to be truly known, we have to go to God. Look at what David says in verse 1-3:

<sup>1</sup> *You have searched me, LORD,  
and you **know** me.*

"Lord, you know me better than I know myself"

<sup>2</sup> *You **know** when I sit and when I rise;  
you **perceive** my thoughts from afar.*

<sup>3</sup> *You **discern** my going out and my lying down;  
you are **familiar with all my ways**.*

"You know what I'm going to say before I say it Lord" (v.4).

God doesn't just know what you had for breakfast this morning; he knows all the different thoughts that were swirling around your mind as you ate it - what you were looking forward

to about the day, who were worried about seeing, the persistent grief you feel. God knows you. But he also cares for you. We see this in the imagery of verse 5 “You lay your hand upon me.” This isn’t a hand of judgment but of comfort.

*<sup>6</sup>Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,  
too lofty for me to attain.*

Part of what makes us lonely is the belief that no one really knows us. Maybe they recognise our face at church, maybe they know a few superficial facts about my job or my hobbies, but they don’t know *me*. That might be true of others, but it is not true of God. He knows *you*.

“But God doesn’t just *know* me,” says David. “He is *with* me where ever I go.” And that’s the second part of David’s prayer:

## **2. “You are the God who’s with me” (vv.7-12).**

“Lord you’re with me.”

Most of us want to someone who will stick our side in life. Someone we can depend on to be there when we need them.

This desire is captured perfectly in Marvin Gaye’s fantastic song “Ain’t know mountain high enough. The song is all about his commitment to be present with and available to his love.

You might remember the chorus:

*Ain't no mountain high enough*

*Ain't no valley low enough*

*Ain't no river wide enough*

*To keep me from getting to you babe*

Most of us, I think, long for a someone like this – particularly in our loneliness. The only problem is that it's kind of unrealistic. You see there are many things that stop others getting to us when we need them. Cancelled flights, closed borders, ill health.

If we want someone who will meet the dream of Marvin Gaye's song, then again, we find it in relationship with the living God. David is clear – there really “ain't no mountain high enough to keep God from getting to us.” Look at what David says in verse 7:

<sup>7</sup> *Where can I go from your Spirit?*

*Where can I flee from your presence?*

<sup>8</sup> *If I go up to **the heavens**, you are there;*

*if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.*

<sup>9</sup> *If I rise on the wings of the dawn,*

*if I settle on the far side of the sea,*

“Whether I go up, down, east or west...”

<sup>10</sup> *even there your hand will guide me,*

*your right hand will **hold me fast**.*

And I think we need to let that last imagine sink in – you see it's not just that God is *with* us but that He is *holding* us by his right hand. It makes me think of a Father holding on tight to

the hand of his three year old as he walks her though a car park. It's a picture of unfailing love, intimate relationship and safety.

And notice that no matter how dark things get for David, how afflicted, depressed or lonely he becomes God won't lose him or let go of him in that darkness. Verse 11:

*“If I say, “Surely the darkness will hide me  
and the light become night around me,”  
<sup>12</sup> even the darkness will not be dark to you;  
the night will shine like the day,  
for darkness is as light to you.*

God sees and holds His people even if His people struggle to see and hold on to Him.

“Lord, you know me.” “Lord, your with me.” Third, “Lord, you made me and therefore I am valuable in your sight.”

### **3. “You are the God who made me.”**

I wonder if you've ever questioned your worth or value as a person? I think we can do this sometimes when we are incredibly lonely. “What's wrong with me!? “Why do I struggle so much to have deep friendships?” “Why do others seem to be in these tight friendships or romantic relationships but not me?” “Why am I always the one to have to make the first move with people? It feels like no one really values me.”

When we feel like this we need to do what David does and get our sense of identity and value from *God* and not others. God made us, and He values what He makes.

And notice that David isn't just saying in verse 13ff, "God you are the creator of life." No it's much more personal. "God, you created *my* life."

Listen to His words from verse 13:

<sup>13</sup> *For you created **my** inmost being;*

*you knit **me** together in my mother's womb.*

<sup>14</sup> *I praise you because **I am** fearfully and wonderfully made;*

*your works are wonderful,*

*I know that full well.*

Parents might occasionally get surprised by the news of a baby on the way, but not God – there are no surprises with God – He is there right at the beginning of life – forming us and getting us ready for all the days He has ordained for us [whether they be short or long].”

Look at verse 16:

<sup>15</sup> *My frame was not hidden from you*

*when I was made in the secret place,*

*when I was woven together in the depths of the earth.*

<sup>16</sup> *Your eyes saw my unformed body;*

*all the days ordained for me were written in your book*

*before one of them came to be.*

And notice that God isn't like a worker on a production line, just putting each person together – one after the other in a detached kind of way. No! God is relational in all of this. Because He values what He makes He thinks upon each of them. Verse 17:

*<sup>17</sup> How precious to me are your thoughts,<sup>[a]</sup> God! [i.e. your thoughts about my life that I've just been talking about]*

*How vast is the sum of them!*

*<sup>18</sup> Were I to count them,*

*they would outnumber the grains of sand—*

No matter how disconnected I feel from others, I can always say that I'm loved and valued by the One whose opinion truly matters.

For David, there is nothing more satisfying than being in relationship with God. God completely knows him. God is always present with him. God made him *made* and therefore values him.

Have you ever had something so good that you just wished it would never end? A truly romantic date? An awesome holiday? A delicious pizza? As good as these moments are they are always slightly tainted by the knowledge they will end. The date will have to finish. You'll need to return to work. The pizza will be eaten or go cold. But here's the truly good news for those who are in relationship with God. That glory will never end! And I think that's what David is getting at when he says at the end of verse 18:



*when I awake, I am still with you.*

This is one good thing that doesn't have to come to an end. David has life and relationship with God and nothing will take it from him – not even death itself. God has David for eternity. In Ps 17, David uses this same expression when he is describing the contrast between the wicked, whose pleasure is bound up in *this life* only with himself who looks forward to eternal life in beyond this world with the God he knows: Ps 17:15:

*As for me, I will be vindicated and will see your face;*

***when I awake, I will be satisfied with seeing your likeness.***

David is showing us that though we may be lonely, with God we are never truly alone. He knows us. He's with us. He made us.

Now perhaps when you were hearing this Psalm read out you thought, "Hmm, did verses 19-24 really need to be added there – it was so nice up until that point."

But I think these last verses serve to remind us that the Psalms are the words of *real* people with real and raw emotions – people who get sad, lonely, distressed, angry. These verses remind us that when *we* feel grieved by life we can likewise go to the God who knows us, is with us, made and values us – and be real with him.

– which do come across as quite confronting remind us that this

So let's listen to David's final words: "Lord hear my cry!"

#### **4. "Lord, hear my cry."**

Read with me verse 19:

*19 If only you, God, would slay the wicked!*

*Away from me, you who are bloodthirsty!*

David goes to God with his distress about the wicked he live amongst. But how should we process these words.

Well think for a moment how you would feel if the person you most loved in life was being unfairly attacked and ridiculed (you're mother, your child, your sibling). You'd be distressed by it wouldn't you? If heard someone speaking degrading lies about my wife it would enrage me. Why? Because I love her and I'm zealous to honour her and her reputation. And I think a similar thing is happening here. It's not *spite* that is driving David's words but *zeal*. Zeal for the God he loves and has just been singing praises to.

Notice in verse 20 David doesn't saying "They speak of *me* with evil intent" but "they speak of *You* with evil intent" (v.20) – and that's what infuriates him.

"God I can't stand it! "They misuse *your* name, they hate *you* (v.21), they are in rebellion to *you*."

And David gets very honest with God doesn't he: "Do I not hate and abhor them?" "I have nothing but hatred for them (v.22). "I count them as my enemies."

But notice that David's zeal for God doesn't make him look out there to those people – it gets him to look inward at his own life. He wants God to help him not slip into the way of wickedness. Look at vv.23-24:

<sup>23</sup> Search *me*, God, and know *my* heart;

test me and know my anxious thoughts.

<sup>24</sup> See if there is any offensive way in *me*,

and lead me in the way everlasting.

But David's words here remind us that we still live in a sinful and broken world as we walk with God this side of Heaven. But they also remind us *how* to process the evil and brokenness of the world that we live in. Like David we are to go to God with that distress. God is just and will ultimately deal with sin. God is gracious and he will help those who call on Him. That's why David doesn't take matters into his own hands but gives it up to God.

Loneliness, like all forms of suffering reminds us that we walk with God in a broken world like David. We grieve as we feel the lack of connected to others. In these moments this Psalm is telling us that we may be lonely but we are not alone.

### **Walking the lonely road**

Psalm 139 tell us of the beauty of being in relationship with Living God – We are *known* by Him. We are safe *with* Him. We are made and valued by Him. We can cry out to Him. This is what we need to cling to when we walk with God through times of loneliness.

Because the reality is that most of us will at some point walk that lonely road. Feelings of loneliness can happen at any time, but there are certain times in life where we can feel particularly disconnected from others.

- It might come when we move for study, work or the mission field.

- It might come amidst a chronic illness that leaves shut in and alone for long periods of the day.
- It might come in the context of long-term singleness.
- It might come in the context of an unhappy marriage.
- It might come when we lose a loved one or when our children move out of home.
- It might come in the context of being cooped up with small children.

For most of us, walking the lonely road isn't a matter of if but when.

But the good news of this passage tells us that for those who belong to God though we are lonely, we're never truly alone. And actually as we see the rest of the Biblical story unfold God makes it clear that the only way to belong to Him and to know his presence is to trust in and follow Jesus. You see, the truth is that there is something worse than being cut off from people, and that is being cut off from God because of our sin – that is our desire to live life on our terms not God's terms. But in his deep love for sinners, God sent His Son to bear our sin on the cross, forgiving us of our sin, and bring us into relationship with God now and into eternity. Because of Jesus, we can say like David, "when I awake I am still with you!" We can know that Jesus will lead us in the way everlasting.

As Paul says in Colossians 1:21-22:

*<sup>21</sup> Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of<sup>[g]</sup> your evil behavior. <sup>22</sup> But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation.*

Jesus walked that lonely road to the cross so that you will never have to walk your lonely road without God. Maybe you're not yet a follower of Jesus but you like the idea that the living God would hold you now and for eternity. If that is the case, I'd love to speak further to you. Perhaps you'd like to join simply Christianity that starts this Tuesday. Relationship with God is something worth investigating.

But for those of us who do follow Jesus, I want to wrap up by thinking of three ways this Psalm teaches us to walk with God – particularly in times of loneliness. It teaches us to see God rightly, talk to God honestly, hope in God patiently.

*1. See God Rightly.*

This Psalm teaches us to see God *rightly*. One thing is for sure in the Psalm – David sees the beauty of His God. He relishes the fact that God knows Him at a deep level, that God is with Him wherever he goes and that God made and therefore values Him greatly.

Does the way you *think* about God match the way David does?

Or is your view of God cold, distant, unconcerned, spiteful? That's how we can often feel.

That is not the picture we get here. And it is certainly not the picture of God we see of God in Jesus. You can't look at Jesus death for you at the cross and say God doesn't really want to be close to me, God doesn't really care about me, God can't help me.. The cross tells us that no matter how lonely we are, God is committed to us - guiding us through it, holding us in his right hand. Do you see God rightly?

*2. Speak to God honestly*

Second, this passage teaches us to *speak* to God honestly. The more we speak to God the more we remind ourselves of what is true – that we are not truly alone. God is with us and invites us to be real with him about how we’re going. David doesn’t just pour out praise but raw and intense emotion to his God who trusts in.

But sometimes prayer can be difficult when we’re lonely. Everything just seems harder when life is tough. We might think: “I know I should be praying, but I don’t really know what to say.” If you’re struggling with prayer, then you may actually want to let the words of this and other psalms to guide you.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer called the Psalms the “prayer book of the bible.” They give us words when we struggle. So perhaps this week you may want to take various sections of *this* Psalm and bring it into your prayers:

*Dear Heavenly Father,*

*Thank you that in Jesus I can say along with David that no matter how high, low, far or wide*

*I might go:*

*<sup>10</sup> even there your hand will guide me,*

*your right hand will hold me fast.*

*God, you know I’m feeling lonely and disconnected – please refresh my soul with these words and help me to feel their truth in my life.*

*Amen.*

### *3. Hope in God patiently.*

Third, Psalm 139 teaches us to *hope* in God patiently. Relief from loneliness may not come quickly – Like David, we may be called to patiently hope in our good God through various

and extended times of loneliness. But David knew that patient hope was always worth it — God would hold him by his right hand, sustaining him in this life and carry him into the eternity of the next life.

In 1 Timothy 5:5 Paul describes the widow who is alone and yet hopes in God.

*<sup>5</sup> The widow who is really in need and left all alone puts her hope in God and continues night and day to pray and to ask God for help.*

This woman knows that though she may be lonely and in need she is never truly alone. She has hope in God that He can provide for her needs often through the charity of His people. But as a *Christian* widow, she has hope that God will one day bring an end to her lonely lifestyle in the new heavens and new earth.

Our world likes to convince us it has the ultimate answer to loneliness. Romcoms tell us that it is found in finding your soul mate. Pornography tells us that it is found in online elicited sexual intimacy. Social media tells us that it is found in being connected to more and more people. Netflix tells us that it's found in the relationships we develop with characters we love to watch.. In fact Reed Hastings, the CEO of Netflix actually said in an interview a few years ago that:

*“Fundamentally we are about eliminating loneliness and boredom.”*

Boredom maybe – but not loneliness. Netflix and other forms of pleasure offer mere distraction not elimination.

If we want our loneliness to be truly eliminated we need to look not to the creator of Netflix but to the God the creator of us who promises to make all new when Christ returns. No more tears, no more pain, no more loneliness – just sweet fellowship with God and His people forever.

### **Conclusion – Amy Charmichael**

Camille has a bed time book called “100 extraordinary stories for courageous girls.” It tells the story of 100 different believing women who showed remarkable faith in God during their lifetime. A couple of nights ago we read the story of Amy Charmichael – a young woman who loved and taught the gospel to orphaned children in India for 55 years. Amy remained single her whole life. In her later years she spoke about her decision to turn down marriage to serve in India and the loneliness it brought. She said:

*"I had feelings of fear about the future. The devil kept on whispering, 'It's all right now, but what about afterward? You are going to be very lonely.' He painted pictures of loneliness. I turned to my God in desperation and said, 'Lord, what can I do? How can I go on to the end?' and He said, 'None of them that trust in Me shall be desolate [Ps 34:22]' That word has been with me ever since.*

Amy learnt to walk with God in her loneliness and found satisfaction in Him. He was the God who knew her. He was the God who was always with her. He was the God who made and valued her. He was the God she could always cry out to. We will all experience loneliness, but in Jesus we have the glorious truth Amy did that we are never truly alone.