

# “The Awesome Greatness of God”

## Sermon on Psalm 139

St Paul’s – 28<sup>th</sup> January 2007

Do you have a favourite Psalm?

Any volunteers?

There is a common view that, if you take a poll of any group of Christians, their favourite Psalm will be Psalm 23. “The Lord’s my Shepherd, I shall not want.”

Apparently Psalm 23 is the Logie winner in the Popular Psalm category. It’s the People’s Choice Award at the ARIAs. It’s the most famous. Psalm 23 has got the popular vote. It’s memorable and memorised. It’s easy on the ears, and heavy on the heart. Wrapped up in just a few verses, Psalm 23 has got all the bling of psalmody.

However, if you take that poll of any group of Christians, you may observe something else. And that is that some people will have no trouble telling you what their favourite is, while others will find this not so easy.

You see, there are two types of people in the world. How many times have we heard that? *There are two types of people in the world.* One clever person observed that there are two types of people in the world, there are people who believe there are two types of people in the world, and there are people who believe there are not.

Anyway, in this case, I believe there are two types of people in the world. First, there are those who, when asked what their favourite is, respond with a single answer.

You ask What’s your favourite colour? And they answer quickly with one colour. Usually, red. Or if not, usually blue.

Then there is the other type of person who will want to give you a list.

You ask What’s your favourite colour? And they umm and ahh a bit and then say, “Well I quite like red you know, but sometimes I like blue better, and I did see a rather nice shade of tangerine the other day.”

Well Praise God for making us different, is all I want to say to that.

And to say that, when it comes to the Psalms, I’m pretty much in the second category. I don’t have a favourite Psalm. But I do have a short list.

And the Psalm we read this morning, Psalm 139, is definitely on my short list.

But then, so is Psalm 1. I really like the image in Psalm 1 of the Godly person being like “a tree planted by the rivers of water.”

And I also like Psalm 22. For no particular reason other than it is not Psalm 23. It would be a bit like being Roger Federer’s younger brother. Here it is, stuck under the shadow of the most popular Psalm in the world, and does it complain? Psalm 22 does not resent the fame of Psalm 23. It does not pout or smash its tennis racquet into the Rebound Ace. Psalm 22 is a fine example of Christian humility and I love it for that. It also has a fine line about worms. The writer of Psalm 22 says “I am a worm.” And when I think about how awesome God really is, I think that pretty much sums up how I feel. Rather worm-ish.

And thinking about how awesome God is, leads us neatly onto today’s Psalm. Psalm 139.

And yes, this one is also on my short list of favourites.

There are four themes that are interwoven in Psalm 139.

The first theme tells us something about how intimately God knows us. The psalmist begins by saying “O Lord, you have searched me and you know me.”

And then he ends with the same idea, which is really the 4<sup>th</sup> theme – a prayer that God will continue to search him, and know him, and clean up the sin in his life, and lead and guide him forever.

“Search me, O God, and know my heart;  
Test me, and know my anxious thoughts.  
See if there is any offensive way in me,  
And lead me in the way everlasting.”

The second theme is about just how awesome and great and amazing God really is.

Reflecting on God’s mind, the writer says “How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand.”

Let’s think about that just for a moment.

How awesome is God, really?

The intellect of God is so huge that the number of his thoughts is more than the number of grains of sand on every beach in every country on the whole planet. How many grains of sand would that be? How big a number would that be?

God’s mind is bigger.

Do you know how many nerve cells there are in your brain? The answer is approximately 20 billion. That’s a number with a 2, followed by 10 zeroes. Now each of those 20 billion nerve cells makes about 10,000 connections with other nerve cells. That is 20 billion times 10,000 connections. That’s in your brain.

I think that’s a 2 followed by 16 zeroes, but I’m not sure. My brain hurts trying to do the maths.

The writer of Psalm 139 knew less about our brains than you and I do, and he can still say “I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made.” And he didn’t know the half of it. But he was surely right. The human brain is an amazing creation that can do amazing things.

But God’s mind is bigger. Not just bigger than your brain, or my brain. But bigger and more awesome than all the brains he’s made.

How awesome is God?

You know, if you were to ask me if I had a favourite hymn, I probably *would* answer with just one.

My favourite hymn is one written by the English songwriter, Graham Kendrick. Graham Kendrick also wrote “Shine, Jesus, Shine,” but I forgave him for that because he also wrote “The Servant King” – really, a 20<sup>th</sup> Century Psalm.

There is a wonderful line, among many wonderful lines, in “the Servant King.” The line is in the 3<sup>rd</sup> verse:

“Hands that flung stars into space, to cruel nails surrendered.”

*Hands that flung stars into space.*

The creator of the Universe is an awesome being. Powerful and creative enough to fling stars into space. Mighty enough to create the universe. How great is our God?

Do you have any idea of just how big the universe is?

I remember my primary school teacher showing us the size of the solar system using a one-kilometre walk. He began by producing a ball about the size of my head. He said this was to represent the sun.

Then the teacher asked, “How big would the earth be, relatively speaking, if the sun were as big as your head?”

The answer he gave us is, “the earth would be about the size of the pupil in your eye,” and he pointed at the pupil of the nearest pupil, and then produced a tiny little ball bearing that was about the size of the pupil in the student’s eye.

Now, he explained, the earth is actually 13,000 kilometres in diameter, but he urged us to imagine we were God, and we were looking down on this tiny part of our creation, even though it was 13,000 kilometres across. As a young student I thought God, apparently, had to be very big indeed.

Then he said, if I am going to keep things in proportion, how far away from our ball-bearing earth do I put the head-sized Sun. The smarter ones in the class figured this was a trick question and kept quiet, but Gary Holden who always spoke before engaging his brain, said “A couple of steps, sir?”

“Not even close, young Gary,” intoned the teacher, “not even close.”

“If we take one step in this solar system we have created, we will have travelled how far?” I think this was when mathematics started to hurt my brain.

The teacher rescued me from imminent migraine with the answer, “In our reduced-size solar system, one step will take us 6 million kilometres.”

He let that 6 million kilometres sink in a bit then asked “How far is it from the earth to the sun.” Now the smarter students, or at least the ones who would go on to be quiz champions, recalled what we had been asked to read in our textbooks the night before. And Patricia Wham, who was always top of the class, informed the rest of us that the sun was 150 million kilometres from earth. I thought it was actually 149,669,000 kilometres, but I had learned never to argue with Patricia.

Now the teacher got us to do a quick calculation and we worked out that we should place the sun and earth 26 paces apart.

Now I am sure most of us can imagine how far 26 paces is. It’s a little bit further than the width of this room.

So now we had a head-sized sun over there, and a ball-bearing sized earth 26 paces away over there, and we could all see that the distance between our earth and our sun was indeed vast.

But we had only come 26 steps into our one-kilometre long model of the solar system.

For the rest of the model, the teacher had various objects. He used the head of a pin to represent the size of Mars and it was 13 steps further away from earth. Then he had a walnut to represent the giant planet Jupiter, and it was a surprising 92 steps further on from Mars. Saturn was one of those big marbles we used to call Conkers and it was a rather stunning 108 more steps from Jupiter. It was another stupendous 240 steps before we put down the peanut to represent Uranus, and another 271 steps before another peanut was put down for Neptune and finally another 234 steps before another pin was produced to represent Pluto.

The class all looked back to where we had started. The sun was a kilometre away and so tiny in the distance that we couldn’t even see it.

In celestial terms we had walked nearly 6 billion kilometres and in fact we weren’t even at the edge of the solar system, only at the last known planet.

But, as impressive as this was on our young minds, we were soon to discover that in terms of the universe, these distances are tiny. If we were to keep walking until we got to the nearest

star, and presuming we started our journey with Miss Alison Holdsworth's class at the Great Ryrie Primary School, we would not reach the nearest star for quite a while. We would have to walk all the way to Darwin first, then walk on water and across the various islands we encountered until finally, after 6,700,000 steps we arrived at Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam. And that is where the nearest star would be located.

The NEAREST star. Can we have any idea how stupendously large the universe is? The universe created by the one whose hand flung stars into space? How many stars?

Our sun is just one of so many stars. Roughly speaking there are about  $10^{21}$  stars in the Universe. That's a number so big I don't think it has a name. That's a 1 with 21 zeroes after it. There are that many stars, and the NEAREST one, even in our tiny scaled down model where the whole earth is the size of a ball bearing, the NEAREST star is in Vietnam.

And all this was created by the one whose hand flung the stars into space. How Great is Our God. Our God is an Awesome God.

How can our minds even conceive how great is our God? How can we get our heads around this kind of awesomeness?

I think we need to approach this with a very large dose of humility. The Psalmist certainly does. He says:

“Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain. . . . your works are wonderful.”

Surely we can only be filled with amazement and wonder at some truths that are clearly beyond the capacity of our minds to understand.

Don't you think that sometimes we presume a bit too much about God? A God that great that He could create the Universe, and we rattle on about how much we know about him when the truth is that much of God is simply un-knowable.

I was impressed by an exchange between two of the characters in the television show “The West Wing” recently. White House staffer, Toby Ziegler, was given the job of trying to get some favour from a Conservative Right-Wing Evangelical Senator. In the middle of the conversation, this Senator from the Christian Right asks Toby, who is Jewish by the way, “Tell me, Toby, do you believe the Bible to be literally true?”

And Toby immediately replies, “Yes sir, but I don't think either of us is smart enough to understand it.”

Well, I like the humility that that expresses. Some of us have been reading the Bible so long we think we understand it. We think we have the answers. We think we know the length and breadth of it.

The Psalmist wants to remind us that whatever we know about a ball-bearing earth, and a one-kilometre solar system, the Universe, and especially the God who created it, is much bigger than anything we know.

The English astrophysicist, Sir Arthur Eddington, said that “not only is the universe stranger than we imagine, it is stranger than we *can* imagine.” And I think we have to put our knowledge of God in the same category. Not only is God more awesome than we imagine, he's more awesome than we *can* imagine.

Yet, something in the Psalm is maybe even more awesome. And that is, despite the fact that there is much about God that is patently unknowable, despite his ineffable nature, a nature so great that we cannot express it in mere words . . . despite this, God is always with us. Always. Everywhere we go. He is there.

The Psalmist puts it this way:

“If I go up the heavens, you are there, if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.”

Wow. How many of us know this to true! I’m sure the Psalmist never imagined the kind of society we live in today. A world in which people regularly fly up into the heavens, rise on the wings of the dawn, and almost routinely leave their homes and settle on the far side of the sea.

And when we have done that, we have found God already there. He’s been there to guide us. His right hand holding us fast.

People who have gone on missionary work were often thought to be going to pagan lands. They were commended to go to the so-called “Godless pagans”. Yet when they got amongst these allegedly Godless folk, they often found God in the midst. God was there. Ahead of them, preparing the way.

I remember talking to a pastor from the Massai people of East Africa. He told me about how in traditional Massai spirituality there was a blood sacrifice ritual that involved the sacrifice of a lamb. Missionaries came to his people and when they talked about the lamb who was slain for humankind, the Massai said, “Oh yes, we know what you are talking about. We’ve been waiting to hear this message.”

God was already there. Preparing the way for the missionaries to fulfil his Good News for the Massai.

Yes, even though our God is great beyond our understanding, he is also so close and intimate that he knows everything about everyone of us. Even that is so hard to understand. Yet the Psalmist reminds us that it is true.

The Psalm says that God “created my inmost being, you knit me together in my mother’s womb. . . . when I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.”

God knows each of us intimately, even while we seem to know so little about God. As St Paul says “we see through a glass darkly” – it’s like looking through frosted glass. But God sees us with absolute clarity. Jesus says the even the hairs of our head are numbered. God knows how much hair I have! Wow. And I was worried he had stopped counting.

What should our response be?

The Psalmist begins by recognising that God has searched him and already knows him. And that’s how he suggests we should respond.

“Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”

God knows us. He has already searched us. He knows our hearts. The good and the bad that is in us. The Psalmist’s prayer ought to be our prayer too. Welcome the personal attention of a God who is great enough to have flung stars into space, yet loved us so much as to surrender those same hands to cruel nails.

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Edwin Orr was one of last century’s great Christian apologists. He was one of those preachers who seemed to have an answer for every tough question. But not in a smart, know-it-all kind of way. He had that wonderful encouraging logic of the great teachers. People like C.S. Lewis, William Barclay and John Stott. He could explain the Christian faith with disarming clarity.

I heard him preach once. At the Blackburn North Baptist Church. It was some time in the early 1980s I guess. And we sang a song he had written. Now although Edwin Orr could

explain God more clearly than any person I had ever heard, his favourite verses of Scripture were these last two verses of Psalm 139.

Search me, O God, and know my heart today

Try me, my Saviour, know my thoughts, I pray

See if there be some wicked way in me

Cleanse me from every sin, and set me free.

We haven't sung Edwin Orr's hymn very often lately. The tune may be familiar. It comes from New Zealand and is commonly called "The Maoris' Farewell". I believe they still sing the words of "Now Is The Hour" to this tune when ships leave the wharves in New Zealand.

Let's sing this hymn as our response to the Great and Awesome God, who knows our hearts so intimately.