



## Darkness Is As Light To You | Psalm 139

Many of you know the story of Job. In the Bible, Job was a wealthy man with a large family; he was also upright and righteous before God. Satan challenges God, claiming that Job only trusted God because he was rich and had a comfortable life. So God gives permission to Satan to tempt Job by taking away everything in Job's life. Job loses his job, his wealth, his health, and even his family.

All of us have known trials of some kind or another. Some of you have been in situations of desperation. Some of you have felt utter despair at some great calamity. Over the years I've had the privilege to serve as an elder among you, I've heard heartbreaking stories of marriages falling apart. Of repeated bouts of unemployment. Of crippling disease, prolonged illness and physical debility. Of the unexpected death of loved ones. And this is on top of the normal wear and tear of life, the way that the normal routine can grind us down with repetition and weariness.

Within the past year, my family has added some stories of our own as we've had serious challenges with health, school, and jobs. In fact, just one month ago the Lord brought me to a place of desperation unique in my adult life. I did not know where I would work or where we would live. I had exhausted almost every option I could think of, and time was almost up.

What do we do when God brings us to that place? A place where we feel utterly powerless, alone, and beset on all sides? How do we carry on? More, how do we stay faithful to our God? In Job's case, his wife and friends came to him and told him to curse God and die. I think it must have been tempting to Job. It must have seemed the rational thing to do: God had seemingly abandoned him, so he should abandon God. In our case, we feel the temptation to wallow in anger, resentment, bitterness, and despair. Some go further: I've lost two good friends who ended their own lives in the face of such despair.

If you're sitting here in church, you probably know the Sunday School answer; that is, the official church answer of proper theology. We should trust God and accept what comes in the knowledge that all things work for his glory and for the good of those who love God. That's a true and right answer, and I'll expand on it this morning. But as we do, I think it's important to recognize that in addition to giving us the textbook answer, God also gives us reason to *trust him* so that even when the right answer doesn't seem to make sense we can still follow him—because of *him*, not because of the textbook. We worship a God of trustworthy character, and he is with us and knows us in every circumstance.

### I. God knows you

We see this most powerfully in the Psalms, the great collection of heartfelt and heart-rending prayers that God has given us to pray back to him. In the Psalms God gives us powerful words of affirmation about his own character, his love for us, and his protective guidance and providential care for us.

I know that the Psalms are a favorite part of the Bible for many Christians. I confess that for much of my life the Psalms didn't make much sense to me. I didn't get them because, in a way, I didn't need to. For much of my life I had not tasted the sort of desperation that I needed to understand what the Psalmists are going through. Then 9/11 happened, and my friends prayed Psalm 139 over me before I deployed overseas. So look with me this morning at God's word for us in Psalm 139.

### A. God knows you

In times of darkness, we feel alone and we feel unknown. It feels like no one understands nor cares about us. King David, the author of this Psalm, understands that fear. He had been betrayed, abandoned, and hunted by enemies. He might have concluded that God had abandoned him. Yet David starts this Psalm with a celebration of how intimately God knows him and stays with him.

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 afar.  
You search out my path and my lying down  
    and are acquainted with all my ways.  
Even before a word is on my tongue,  
    behold, O LORD, you know it altogether.

God knows you particularly and specifically and exhaustively. He knows you "when I sit...and when I rise." The Psalms are poems; the language is emotive, symbolic, and image based. To say that God knows me when I sit and when I rise is to say that God knows the full range of my activity. It's sort of like saying "He knows me A to Z." He knows "all my ways."

He knows me even before I know myself: he knows what I'm going to say before I say it. It's a proverbial joke among lovers that they know each other so well they can finish each other's .... sandwiches. That's how well God knows you—even better, in fact, because he doesn't *finish* you sentence, he knows the whole thing even before you begin. God knows you better than you know yourself. God knows all of you, your thoughts, actions, plans, and dreams.

God not only know you. He surrounds you and guides you.

You hem me in, behind and before,  
    and lay your hand upon me.  
Where shall I go from your Spirit?

Or where shall 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 dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,  
even there your hand shall lead me,  
and your right hand shall hold me.

God is with you. He is with you wherever life leads. He is with you in heaven and he is with you in the Sheol—the grave. More on that in a moment. Verses 9 and 10 were especially helpful to me 17 years ago when I was deployed by the Army to serve in Afghanistan. Some translations say “if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me.” I literally settled on the far side of the sea, seven thousands miles from home, and did not know if I would ever come back. What a comfort it was to read that God was with me even there.

God is with you so completely and so thoroughly that some of this language might even feel uncomfortable or stifling. God “hems me in.” He is a fence, a protection, a guardian, boundary line. He keeps us where we need to be. This is a good thing! Sometimes in our very American desire for complete freedom we rebel against the idea of any constraint, but this is a loving hedge that keeps us safe.

In verse 16 we see that God knows us so well, he knows the end of our story.

in your book were written, every one of them,  
the days that were formed for me,  
when as yet there was none of them.

This is a reason for comfort, not fatalism. If God knows you intimately, and he is with you in every place, then the end of the story he has written for you is one you can trust. He is a gentle father who delights in giving good gifts to his children.

### B. God is present in the darkness

That is why the Psalmist can take comfort in God in his darkest moment. God’s knowledge of us and his presence with us are what sustain us in our darkest hour.

If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me,  
and the light about me be night,”  
even the darkness is not dark to you;  
the night is bright as the day,  
for darkness is as light with you.

I don’t have words enough to share how profound this is, or how astonishing, or what it means to me. Many of you have known a dark night of the soul, a time that

feels like utter blackness, a time of hopelessness and despair. A time when you've feared that the darkness will surely cover you, when all about you feels like night. I've had a few—when my parents divorced, when I struggled with depression, when I faced the reality that I might not come home from deployment, when my wife and I struggled with infertility, when my vocational dreams failed to come true, when I did not know how I would provide for my family.

But honestly, some of the worst times were not tied to a specific misfortune that befell me. They came when I simply started to doubt the value of life, when I had an acute sense that none of this matters, everything is meaningless, that, as Shakespeare's MacBeth says, "life is but a walking shadow, a poor player who struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is no more. It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

How can we possibly trust God in those moments? We can trust him, first, because he knows what these dark nights feel like. Note that the Psalmist doesn't deny the reality of the darkness. He doesn't say that the darkness is fake, or that we just need to open our eyes to see the light. No, he says that God is there with us in the darkness.

This I think is what the Psalmist means when he says in verse 8, "If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there." Even when we feel dead inside, or are actually physically dying, God knows what that is like. Remember Job, the man who lost everything in a bet between Satan and God. He hated life.

Job 3:3-4, 11-13

“Let the day perish on which I was born,  
and the night that said,  
'A man is conceived.'  
Let that day be darkness!  
May God above not seek it,  
nor light shine upon it.  
“Why did I not die at birth,  
come out from the womb and expire?  
For then I would have lain down and been quiet;  
I would have slept; then I would have been at rest,

This is in the Bible! Or consider another Psalm, one that I prayed back to God throughout this year.

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?  
How long will you hide your face from me?  
How long must I take counsel in my soul  
and have sorrow in my heart all the day?  
Psalm 13:1-2

But it isn't just that God knows how we feel, and that he was kind enough to put some of the most powerful expressions of despair into his own revelation. It's that God himself went through this darkness. Jesus, the Son of God, knew this darkness; he bore the darkness in himself on our behalf. On the eve of his crucifixion, Jesus went to pray alone.

“And he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, and knelt down and prayed, saying, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done.” And there appeared to him an angel from heaven, strengthening him. And being in agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground.” Luke 22:41–44

Jesus was betrayed by his friends, abandoned, tortured, and executed. But unlike us when we face trials, he went into it knowing full well what was happening—and, for Jesus, the worst darkness was his coming separation from the Father because he took our sins upon himself. He faced greater darkness than we ever have or ever will. Jesus' symptoms here—sweating blood—is actually medically possible and is known to result from extreme levels of anxiety, a sort of delirium of dread. Jesus has been there. And so Jesus can sympathize.

But more: Jesus defeated the darkness. Through Jesus—through his life and resurrection from death—the darkness will end. John tells us that in Jesus, “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it,” (John 1:5). Whatever darkness you have faced or are facing right now, it is not the end of your story. Jesus brings new life.

God is present even in the midst of trial and darkness. He is present whether or not we *feel* his presence. God is bigger than our feelings. It is not only that God is present in the darkness; it is that darkness is as light to him. We can trust God because he sees through the darkness; he has been through the darkness; he sees how the darkness will work for our good; he sees how the darkness is just one line in a grand story of light.

So whether you feel like it or not, trust in the Lord more than yourself, more than your feelings more than your best friends, trust in the Lord. No matter what, because he is more trustworthy.

## **II. Our Response**

How do we respond to such a God, a God who knows us intimately, who surrounds us and loves us, who knows our story and who sees through our darkness?

### A. Praise

First, we praise him. God is trustworthy because God is praiseworthy. He merits the highest compliments we can muster.

In verse 6, the Psalmist reflects on God's presence and knowledge:

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;  
it is high; I cannot attain it. (ESV)

Similarly, in verse 17:

How precious to me are your thoughts, O God!  
How vast is the sum of them!  
If I would count them, they are more than the sand.

Note the contrast. God knows us thoroughly and intimately, but we cannot achieve that level of knowledge of God. Such knowledge is "too wonderful" and we cannot "attain" it. God himself is too infinite for us to know as thoroughly and exhaustively as he knows us. By his grace, we can know true things about him, but we will spend eternity delving ever-deeper into relationship with him and never exhaust his infinite love.

In verse 14

I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.  
Wonderful are your works;  
my soul knows it very well.

The Psalmist praises God's works. He reflects on the wonderful work that is humanity. Christians often use this passage to argue against abortion and in favor of the life of the unborn. I think that's true and we certainly should protect all life. But the Psalmist is making a broader point. God is the author of *life!* In our greatest scientific and technological achievements, we have not yet created life. We study life, we put it under a microscope, we celebrate life, and we mourn its passing. But we have not actually made life. That we are given the privilege of participating in miracle of childbearing is a grace from God, a primal reality of human existence that every one of us has been blessed by but one that we still cannot truly understand.

Also notice the difference here between what the Bible says and what you might hear from the world. In the midst of darkness, the Psalmist comforts himself with how wonderful God is, not how wonderful he is. Sometimes when we give counsel to those in hard times we want to build them up and encourage them and tell them how great they are. But the pattern in this Psalm is not to focus on ourselves, not to try to make ourselves feel better by thinking about how great we are. It is to focus on how great God is, and how trustworthy he is no matter our circumstances.

## B. Anger at Sin

Another appropriate response is anger against injustice. In verses 19-20:

Oh that you would slay the wicked, O God!  
O men of blood, depart from me!  
They speak against you with malicious intent;  
your enemies take your name in vain. (ESV)

When we know God, our anger at his enemies naturally increases. God is a holy God who insists that his people follow his way. You might bristle at the language of God having enemies, but then again, I'm sure you can think of a thousand injustices in the world right now. The wicked are described as men of violence, hatred, and deceit. Do you know of any violence, hatred, and deceit in this world?

Over the past year we've had a running conversation in this church about the enduring realities of racial injustice, about how the deck is still stacked against African American and other people of color. That's real and that's unjust. Racists are God's enemies.

Right now there are Christians who are unable to gather publicly in China, in Saudi Arabia, in North Korea because their government would arrest, imprison, and possibly execute them for following Jesus. That's real and that's unjust. Tyrants are God's enemies.

Only days ago did our government stop its policy of separating children from their parents at the border on the pretext of enforcing immigration policy. That's real and that's unjust. Those who break up families are God's enemies.

But if we are honest, we know it is too easy to find God's enemies out there, in some other place. Note how the Psalmist sums up God's enemies. They are those who "take God's name in vain." That means those who treat allegiance to God casually, especially those who claim such allegiance, who call themselves by God's name, who publicly call themselves one of his followers for worldly gain while secretly following their own agenda.

Christian churches in America have a long history of blessing and excusing sin for the sake of national greatness. I've been digging into this history over the past year. I promise you, you can find "Christian" arguments in favor of slavery, segregation, abortion, racism, sexism, and every other sin in the book. What does it mean to take God's name in vain if not this? Using God's name as a pretext to justify our injustice to others is an insult to God's name.

And Christians who recognize these injustices and respond with apathy, indifference, or a complaint about their supposed powerlessness—what have we done, but taken God's name in vain?

We are God's enemies.

### C. Trust

We are God's enemies in small ways as well as big ones—not just the big dramatic injustices, but in how we cut corners in our relationships, how we indulge small habits of selfishness, how we arrange our lives for our own convenience and pleasure.

In my case, this past year God showed me a new depth to the sinfulness in my heart. We should always mourn hard circumstances and God does want us to be emotionally honest with him, but in my hard circumstances I grumbled, I grew short tempered with my family, I watched a ton of Netflix, and I nursed my wounded pride. I let my heart chase after anything that made me feel valued. I recently shared with a friend how frustrated I was with my needy ego. He laughed and said "I've known that about you for years," and proceeded to recount things from ten years ago that illustrated how selfish and prideful I've always been.

I am God's enemy.

And so our last response to God is to throw ourselves on his mercy, to respond with repentance, supplication, and acceptance. The Psalmist ends with this, in verses 23 and 24:

Search me, O God, and know my heart!  
Try me and know my thoughts!  
And see if there be any grievous way in me,  
and lead me in the way everlasting!

The Psalmist knows that he cannot pray against God's enemies and remain faultless. He pleads for God to search and know him, but this time it is more than knowledge *of* him. The Psalmist wants God to know him personally, to "try" him, to judge him, and to lead him, to root out his sin, to show him his "grievous ways". The Psalmist wants God to help him, to lead him in the way everlasting.

Jesus is the way everlasting. He said "I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father but through me." He went through the darkness before us, and he invites us to follow him through. His death and resurrection paved the way for our new life, which we commemorate shortly with the Lord's Supper.

Jesus prayed, "Not my will, but yours, be done." That is what it looks like to trust God. It is to come to a place where we agree with his will, no matter what it means for us. It means that we plead for God to judge us, and we agree with his judgments, because he is God and his judgments are true.

“Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshiped. And he said, ‘Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.’ Job 1:20-21.

In return, God doesn't promise us anything but himself, life everlasting. Sometimes, that comes with enduring trials in this life. But sometimes, he gives foretastes in this life. God blessed Job with a new lease on life, complete with wealth and possessions. For me and my family, God has indeed showered us with a stream of blessing in the past month, including new jobs for both Jennilee and I and a school for our kids— jobs and schools that are in Washington, D.C. And so with this blessing comes the sorrow of saying farewell to you all. The Lord gave us you, and now he is taking us away again.

To trust God is to arrive at the darkest place and still to say “blessed be the name of the Lord,” and still to plead “lead me in the way everlasting.”

Will you pray not my will but yours be done? Will you yield to God no matter what? You are so known, and so flawlessly loved, that there's nothing you can bring to God that will shock him. Will you let God lead you in the way everlasting?

[Prayer]

[Explain communion]

We're going to celebrate a Christian tradition right now. Sometimes it's called the Lord's Supper, sometimes communion, in other traditions the 'Eucharist.' We are reenacting a ceremony Jesus celebrated with his disciples the night before his death, and we do it to remember Jesus, to call to mind the meaning of his death and resurrection, and to symbolize the unity we enjoy as the church, the body of Christ.

This is a ceremony meant for followers of Jesus. If you're a visitor, we welcome you and are glad you're here. We invite you to pray and reflect during this time.

For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, “This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.