

God is Enough

Refocusing your life

Ray Galea

What are your disappointments in life?

You may have unmet desires—achieving that certain position in the company, or getting a high mark in a significant exam. Maybe you are scarred by grief so profound that you can hardly talk about it. Or perhaps you're unmotivated, and the passionate days of your early Christian life seem so long ago. Whatever the case may be, the issue is the same for all of us: is God enough?

With honesty and humility, Ray Galea reflects on 10 psalms that have helped him put God back in the centre of his life. Ray reminds us of the many reasons we have to join with the psalmist in saying, "Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you."

RAY GALEA is the senior minister at Multicultural Bible Ministry (MBM) in Sydney, and the author of *Nothing in My Hand I Bring* and *From Here to Eternity*. Ray loves his wife, Sandy, his three children, eating Middle Eastern food, listening to Bob Dylan, and watching films set in New York. He especially loves being reminded that God is enough.

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CONTENTS

Introduction	5
1. The one who knows all (Psalm 139)	11
2. The glory of man (Psalm 8)	25
3. A kiss for the King (Psalm 2)	39
4. The suffering and glory of the God-man (Psalm 22)...	55
5. The mercy of God (Psalm 51: part 1)	71
6. A new creation (Psalm 51: part 2)	83
7. Time is not on our side (Psalm 90)	95
8. His Majesty's voice (Psalm 19).....	109
9. Who can dwell in the Lord's presence? (Psalm 15) ...	125
10. Only the good die young (Psalm 73)	139
11. Passing the baton (Psalm 78).....	155
Notes	171

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and Sylvia, each of whom has
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INTRODUCTION

I think I'm coming out of a six-year midlife crisis. I hope so, anyway.

I think the midlife crisis hits the moment you realize you're not going to achieve whatever goals you have set for yourself in life, whether consciously or not. Time is running out—or worse, time *has* run out. I am 49 years old. It is not going to happen!

Being a man, my midlife crisis is particularly connected with my job. The only problem is that I am a minister, a pastor of God's flock. I feel I should somehow be above such things. And what's really tragic is how superficial my unfulfilled goal is. I'm embarrassed to tell anyone what it is. I finally got it off my chest and told my congregation early last year, so I guess I can let you in on the secret: I want a big church. 1000 people will do nicely! But deep down, I don't think it's going to happen.

I knew I was in trouble when I caught myself reading 2 Chronicles looking for tips on how to grow a church. I had started treating God and his word as a means to an end. Somehow, over time, I had started believing the lie that I needed something other than God to feel content.

I had simply lost my way.

I can still remember when Jesus was my all in every sense. But then other things—good things, noble things—began to creep in. I was no longer centred as I had been in my younger faith. The glory of God had ceased to be my greatest joy.

I've been around long enough and spoken to enough people to know that we all lose our way. Many of us are disappointed with God. Life is turning out less like we had hoped and more like we had feared. And, unlike my superficial dream, sometimes our disappointment concerns deep matters of the heart. These matters are not inane or superficial; they cause a great deal of grief.

I know a growing number of faithful couples who long to have their own children but cannot. Consistent prayer, endless fertility diets and expensive and intrusive IVF procedures have all failed to produce a single newborn child, and now it's too late.

I think of the unmarried woman who recently celebrated her 43rd birthday alone, harbouring the nagging doubt that there must be something wrong with her. She had never imagined her future without a husband, but now it looks as if that is what her future holds.

I know a couple who privately came to the realization

that their eight-year marriage, which promised so much, has delivered very little. They are trapped by their own vows in a loveless relationship for as long as they both shall live.

I think of the 22-year-old who found himself in a wheelchair for life after a car accident en route to a Christian conference. He has had to cope with endless unhelpful comments from other Christians, as well as the subsequent losses of a fiancée whom he loved, a job at which he was very good, and the mobility he had taken for granted until the accident.

What are your disappointments in life? Perhaps, like me, you have unmet superficial desires—perhaps it is achieving that certain position in the company, or getting that high mark in a significant exam. Or maybe you are scarred by grief so profound that you can hardly talk about it. Or perhaps you're not so much disappointed as unmotivated; you have allowed the good and the not so good to hijack the best, and the passionate days of your early Christian life seem so long ago. Whatever the case may be, the issue is the same for all of us: is God enough?

We are simply not satisfied with our spiritual blessings in Christ. We end the statement, “For me to be content, I need...” with anything but “Christ alone”.

As I've worked at refocusing myself, the psalms (Psalm 73 in particular) have reminded me of what I'd forgotten. In Psalm 73, the psalmist writes:

Whom have I in heaven but you?

And there is nothing on earth that I desire
besides you. (Ps 73:25)

What a profound truth this is: God is enough. This is what centres me as a Christian. Being with God is all I desire. He is all I ultimately need. I just love shouting it out loud: “God is enough!”

My goal in writing this book is to keep us centred and focused. I have chosen eleven of my favourite psalms. The psalms are brilliant in the way they poetically and elegantly give us core biblical truths in the context of prayer and praise. Not surprisingly, the book of Psalms formed the songbook for Israel to worship the God who creates, sustains and rescues his people.

In my selection I have tried to reflect the variety we find among the psalms. Some are songs of praise; some are songs of lament. Some are corporate; some are individual. King David wrote most of them, although the choir leader, Asaph, wrote two and Moses wrote one. Some speak of the Messiah, others are written by the Messiah, and still others speak of life under the Messiah’s rule. This may explain why the New Testament quotes the book of Psalms more than any other Old Testament book.

The book of Psalms is organized into five broad divisions, but I have cut across those divisions with reckless abandon. My configuration is more like a devotional systematic theology. It begins with the character of God (Psalm 139), followed by the nature of humanity (Psalm 8), the person and work of the Messiah (Psalms 2 and 22), sin, guilt and mercy (Psalm 51), the haunting reality of death (Psalm 90), the nature of revelation in creation and Scripture (Psalm 19), the righteous life in the presence of

God (Psalm 15), living with the tension between what we see and what we believe (Psalm 73) and, finally, the need to pass on the baton to a generation yet unborn (Psalm 78) so that in the end they, like us, will be able to say:

Whom have I in heaven but you?

And there is nothing on earth that I desire
besides you. (Ps 73:25)

One final thing before we begin. Please—let me plead with you—please get out your Bible and read each psalm twice before you read the relevant chapter.

1

THE ONE WHO KNOWS ALL

PSALM 139

The hunger of the human soul

Why do people feel the need to go to counsellors and therapists? I used to be one, so I would often ask myself this question. At one level, it's because people are in need of advice and insight—they are struggling in their marriages, they are deeply depressed, they don't know how to discipline their children...

However, in my experience, advice is not always what people want. Many end up going to a qualified stranger for one very simple reason: *to be known*. They want to share their life in a safe place and have another human being know their story and accept them. Isn't this why we desire close friendships and marriage? To be known and accepted by another? The human psyche deeply craves to be understood.

A friend of mine once scribbled a short poem on a polystyrene coffee cup and gave it to me after church. He wrote, “If I could find a world where I could understand people who understood me, then I would be happy”.

Being at church among God’s people fulfilled that longing for him (although only in part). That longing is also part of the reason for self-help groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Gamblers Anonymous: they provide a place where you can tell your story to people who have walked in your shoes and who share your struggles, knowing that they will understand and not condemn you.

We all want to be understood. You may know what it’s like to have someone carefully listen to you and then thoughtfully reflect back their understanding of what you have said. Your instinctive response is to say, “That is *exactly* how I feel!” You can almost judge how well you listen to others by how often you hear that response. It shows you understand.

I think of the Samaritan woman who met Jesus at the well. When she returned to her village, she called people to “Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did” (John 4:29). Normally it would be terrifying to meet such a man, but for her it was absolutely thrilling. With five marriages behind her she finally met the man of her dreams, who just happened to be the Messiah.

We were built to be known, and in Psalm 139 we discover the mighty, wonderful counsellor God, who knows us inside out and outside in.

The great know-it-all

The beginning of Psalm 139, written by King David of Israel, introduces us to a God who is the great know-it-all.

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.
You hem me in, behind and before,
 and lay your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
 it is high; I cannot attain it. (Ps 139:1-6)

Look at the verbs David uses to describe God. God searches, knows, discerns. He is acquainted with all my ways. All of life is covered and nothing escapes his radar. If I sit or stand, if I am near or far, whether I am going out at 8pm or coming home at 3am; all my ways are known to God. As the famous Police song goes, “Every breath you take, every move you make... I’ll be watching you”. Sting may have had a lover (or a stalker!) in mind, but his words capture God’s moment-by-moment awareness of everyone on the face of this earth.

God knows what you are going to say before you say it. Some of the garbage that leaves our mouths may come as a surprise to us, but it does not surprise God. It may horrify him, but it never surprises him. David writes,

“Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O LORD, you know it altogether” (v. 4). None of the things you say, none of the things you think and none of the things you do is off limits to God. He is all-knowing. The technical word is ‘omniscient’.

I once went to a 21st birthday party where two 14-year-old friends claimed they could read each other’s mind. But they could only do it using numbers from one to ten, and they needed to be facing each other. Their ‘mind-reading’ abilities were fairly limited. But no matter how we communicated the number to one guy, the other would get it right every time. To this day I don’t know how they did it. It was one cool trick. Even though it was only a trick and their mind-reading was limited to ten digits, it was still impressive.

If a person really did know the thoughts of another, we’d be dumbfounded—it just doesn’t happen. So it is difficult for us to fully grasp the concept that God knows, in detail, every precious and private thought we have. We still think that by closing the door or whispering in someone’s ear, we can shut God out—but of course we cannot. It does us good to remember that God knows when you undress another person in your mind. He listens to every piece of gossip you utter about another human being. None of your thoughts or conversations is off the record!

We live out all of life in God’s presence, as Proverbs 5:21 reminds us: “For a man’s ways are before the eyes of the LORD, and he ponders all his paths”. This is also what

David is saying in Psalm 139. In a nutshell: God is inescapable. The idea overwhelms David: “Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it” (v. 6).

Think of the effort it takes for you to know one single person well. Now consider that God is intimately involved in the life of every person on the earth—all six and a half billion of us. This is why we can all pray at the same time without worrying about whether we are going to overwhelm God. We do not need to coordinate the timing of our prayers; God’s concentration is not limited. When it comes to prayer, God does not need the departed saints to assist him. And unlike my computer, God has unlimited memory. So pray directly to God, anytime, anywhere. As you do so, remember that you are trusting God, not educating him.

No place to run

Our all-knowing God is also ever-present.

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.

(Ps 139:7-10)

David tries to imagine a place where God is not, but to no avail. If David climbed up to the heavens and stood on Mount Everest, or sank down into the waters of the Mindanao trench, God would be present. If David moved to the far side of the sea (which for an Israelite was the end of the earth), still God would be there. God is present in the place of the dead, even hell itself! Hell is not a place where people will be in fellowship with God, but they will feel his justice, as they exist in utter darkness for all eternity.

There is no place to run—the prophet Jonah certainly found this out. There is no godforsaken place on the face of the earth. Distance is irrelevant to God. There is no place where God is not. The technical word is ‘omnipresent’. In fact, God is all-knowing *because* he is all-present.

Darkness, which can hide us from each other, is a meaningless category for God:

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.

(Ps 139:11-12)

It’s as though God has a pair of those military night-binoculars. He can see in the dark. We often use darkness to stop people from watching us do things we are ashamed of. That is why they are called ‘deeds of darkness’. But darkness is an ineffective barrier for God, whose eyes pierce the jet blackness of the night. The distinction between

private and public, which we modern Westerners so carefully guard, simply does not exist when we stand before God. Everything is public!

However, the thrust of this psalm is to comfort, not to condemn. You may know the feeling of being completely alone as you lie in bed with tears streaming down your cheeks. You may feel equally alone lying next to a husband or wife who doesn't know you, or doesn't want to know you. This leaves you feeling profoundly unloved and disrespected, each memory as painful as the next. But in this psalm, God is saying to you, "I know your pain. I understand and I am with you." You need never feel alone. What a comfort!

From the womb

God is everywhere and he knows everything; he knows us even in the womb.

For you formed my inward parts;
you knitted me together in my mother's
womb.

I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully
made.

Wonderful are your works;
my soul knows it 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 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.

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.

I awake, and I am still with you.

(Ps 139:13-18)

The all-knowing ever-present God knew David personally before he was born. Likewise, when you were at your most fragile, God fashioned you in the womb. He knew you before you were able to know yourself; even before your parents knew you. When you were just one of 30 possible names, only a tiny foetus, God was intimately involved with you.

Whether your conception was the result of a one-night stand or a loving, committed marriage, it was God who ultimately fashioned you in the womb. Even if your parents did not plan to have you, God certainly planned to make you. This is why abortion is so tragic; it denies God's creative purposes in the life of the unborn.

This personal God has made an astonishing humanity, inspiring David's praise: "I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well" (v. 14). The craftsmanship of the human body leaves the Rolls Royce for dead. When was

the last time you looked in the mirror and congratulated God on his handiwork?

God not only created David but also planned out the days of his life: “In your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them” (v. 16). God is not simply a fortune teller, able to read your future; he is *determining* your future. Not a day passes when God is not in control of every detail of your life. There is no such thing as fate; there is only the personal hand of God at work. You may be overlooked in the crowd, too insignificant to rate a mention on the news or in the conversations of others, but you are known by the one who ultimately counts. At one level this is terrifying, but at another level it is incredibly comforting.

All of this raises a question: will you be satisfied with God knowing you? Are you able to say, “Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you”?

U-turn

At this point, the psalm appears to make a 180-degree turn. You would be excused for wondering what has happened to David. Has he lost it?

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!

(Ps 139:19-20)

David is clearly upset with “the wicked”—those who speak of God with evil intent, thinking he will not hear them. They do not understand that God is all-knowing and ever-present. They blatantly defy this God, thinking they can take him on. David is so upset that he actually wishes God would “slay” these people. What do we make of David’s change in tone? It would be easy for us to dismiss this section by putting it down to David’s sin, but the language used here is not unique to Psalm 139. At the very least, David’s reaction betrays a jealousy for God and his glory—a jealousy lacking in the modern Christian.

Recently, I saw the lovable Oprah Winfrey on YouTube answering a question about her spirituality.¹ She explains that around the age of 27, while attending her Baptist church one Sunday morning, she was listening to the preacher talk about how God is all-knowing and-ever present. She was happily in tune with the message until the preacher spoke about how God is jealous for his honour. Oprah did not like this, and it was a key moment in her decision to leave mainstream Christianity.

I think the passage Oprah heard was very likely Psalm 139. How ironic it is that she is not interested in a God who cares about his honour, when surely Oprah cares for her own honour. If you misrepresented Oprah, I have no doubt that she’d send her lawyers to take you to task—and rightly so! Why do we treat God so differently from how we like to be treated ourselves?

Even though it is right to be jealous for God’s glory, the language of the psalm is hard to hear:

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 complete hatred;

I count them my enemies. (Ps 139:21-22)

You might read these verses and think to yourself, “At last, a verse that justifies my hatred for my own enemies. If it’s good enough for David, it’s good enough for me!”

But we need to think more consciously about how to apply the psalm. First, David speaks from a different theological time zone to us. He was a member of the old covenant. The enemies of God were the enemies of Israel, so they were the enemies of King David. But for those in the new covenant, the enemies of God are redefined. At one level, we are all the ‘enemies’ of God for whom Christ died (Rom 5:10). There is no ‘us and them’. At another level, the enemies of God are identified as the powers of sin, the world, death and the devil. And as new covenant members, we are called to love the enemy and instead hate sin (Matt 5:44).

We also need to remember that this is King David, the Messiah, speaking. And as the definitive Messiah, Jesus is the one who on the last day will reject those who reject him and his Father. It is for Christ, not us, to hate God’s enemies all the way to hell.

And on that day, when God judges his enemies, his all-knowing, ever-present character will be a source of terror, not comfort. In Revelation 6, we see this terrifying picture of God’s final judgement:

Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?” (Rev 6:15-17)

On that day, it would be better for the enemies of God to have a thousand tons of granite fall on them than to stand in the presence of the Lamb’s wrath. Meeting God unforgiven is a nightmare that never ends. You don’t know what terror is until you stand before this holy God on the last day and discover there is no place to run or hide.

Importantly, Psalm 139 explains why Jesus is able, on the day of judgement, to judge the secrets of our thoughts. It also explains why his judgements will be just. With a God who knows all and is ever-present, his verdicts will not rest on the human standard of ‘beyond reasonable doubt’. God has access to all the information. Unlike our court system, there will be no doubt about the rightness of God’s judgements.

A clear conscience

Psalm 139 is not written by an enemy of God, but by one who trusts God. It’s written for those within the circle of

faith as a word of comfort. This psalm produces praise and wonder, and inspires confession:

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!
(Ps 139:23-24)

It is impossible to keep any secrets from God. So David calls on his God to search him out. He does not want to pretend before a God who knows all. In the same way that I invite the spell checker on my computer to expose my typing errors and bring them to my attention, David calls on God to bring to light any offensive way within him. Confession is not about informing God of our sin; it's about agreeing with God's verdict on our life.

Make it your aim to have a clear conscience before God. We ought to live our lives with the aim of being able to say alongside the apostle Paul, "You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers" (1 Thess 2:10). This should be our deathbed boast.

You may be mindful of those past sins that dog your life and line your past; sins that weigh heavily on your conscience, even though you've confessed them with repentance. Please know that God is saying to you, "I knew you would commit that sin before I made you. I chose you, knowing you would commit that sin. I was present when you committed that sin. But I want you to

know: I stapled that sin to the body of my dear Son, and it is left at the cross, never to be used against you.”

The good news is that now there is one thing that God does not know—your sin. God’s great promise is that “I will remember their sin no more” (Jer 31:34).

FOR REFLECTION

- How has this psalm’s description of God affected you? Does it comfort you or threaten you?
- Are you willing to invite God to search you out? If not, why not?
- Do you make it your aim to have a clear conscience?