

# Exposition on Psalm 139

by St. Augustine

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*St. Augustine's exposition on Psalm 139 emphasizes God's omniscience, the importance of humility, and the transformative power of His presence in our lives.*

**Scripture:** Psalm 138:1-3, Psalm 138:5-7, Psalm 139:1, Psalm 139:4-5, Psalm 139:7-9, Psalm 139:11, Psalm 139:13, Psalm 139:15, Philippians 2:6

**Topics:** "Divine Nature", "Christian Unity"

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## Description

St. Augustine preaches about the unity of Christ with believers, emphasizing how Jesus speaks through prophecy and the Psalms, uniting His divinity with our humanity. He highlights the importance of understanding God's eternal nature and His willingness to take on mortal form for our salvation. St. Augustine encourages believers to surrender their thoughts and paths to God, seeking His guidance in the everlasting way without sin, ultimately leading to Christ, the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

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## Transcript

1. ...Our Lord Jesus Christ speaks in the Prophets, sometimes in His own Name, sometimes in ours, because He makes Himself one with us; as it is said, they two shall be one flesh. Wherefore also the Lord says in the Gospel, speaking of marriage, therefore they are no more two, but one flesh. One flesh, because of our mortality He took flesh; not one divinity, for He is the Creator, we the creature. Whatsoever then our Lord speaks in the person of the Flesh He took upon Him, belongs both to that Head which has already ascended into heaven, and to those members which still toil in their earthly wandering. Let us hear then our Lord Jesus Christ speaking in prophecy. For the Psalms were sung long before the Lord was born of Mary, yet not before He was Lord: for from everlasting He was the Creator of all things, but in time He was born of His creature. Let us believe that Godhead, and, so far as we can, understand Him to be equal to the Father. But that Godhead equal to the Father was made partaker of our mortal nature, not of His own store, but of ours; that we too might be made partakers of His Divine Nature, not of our store, but of His.

2. Lord, You have tried me, and known me Psalm 138:1. Let the Lord Jesus Christ Himself say this; let Him too say, Lord, to the Father. For His Father is not His Lord, save because He has deigned to be born according to the flesh. He is Father of the God, Lord of the Man. Would you know to whom He is Father? To the coequal Son. The Apostle says, Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God. Philippians 2:6-7 To this Form God is Father, the Form equal to Himself, the only-begotten Son,

begotten of His Substance. But forasmuch as for our sakes, that we might be re-made, and made partakers of His Divine Nature, being renewed unto life eternal, He was made partaker of our mortal nature, what says the Apostle of Him? He says, yet He emptied Himself, and took upon Him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men, and was found in fashion as a man. He was in the Form of God, equal to the Father; He took upon Him the form of a servant, so as therein to be less than the Father....

3. You have known My down-sitting and Mine up-rising Psalm 138:2. What here is down-sitting, what up-rising? He who sits, humbles himself. The Lord then sat in His Passion, up-rose in His Resurrection. You, he says, hast known this; that is, You have willed, You have approved; according to Your will was it done. But if you choose to take the words of the Head in the person of the Body: man sits when he humbles himself in penitence, he rises up when his sins are forgiven, and he is lifted up to the hope of everlasting life. Lift not up yourselves, unless you have first been humbled. For many wish to rise before they have sat down, they wish to appear righteous, before they have confessed that they are sinners....

4. You have understood my thoughts from afar; You have tracked out my path and my limit Psalm 138:3; and all my ways You have seen beforehand Psalm 138:4. What is, from afar? While I am yet in my pilgrimage, before I reach that, my true country, You have known my thoughts....The younger son went into a far country. After his toil and suffering and tribulation and want, he thought on his father, and desired to return, and said, I will arise, and go to my father. I will arise, said he, for before he had sat. Here then you may recognise him saying, You have known my down-sitting and up-rising. I sat, in want; I arose, in longing for Your Bread. You have understood my thoughts from afar. For far indeed had I gone; but where is not He whom I had left? Wherefore the Lord says in the Gospel, that his father met him as he was coming. Truly; for he had understood his thoughts from afar. My path, he says; what, but a bad path, the path he had walked to leave his father?...What is, my path? That by which I have gone. What is, my limit? That whereunto I have reached. You have tracked out my path and my limit. That limit of mine, far distant as it was, was not far from Your eyes. Far had I gone, and yet You were there. And all my ways You have seen beforehand. He said not, hast seen, but, hast seen beforehand. Before I went by them, before I walked in them, You saw them beforehand; and You permitted me in toil to go my own ways, that, if I desired not to toil, I might return into Your ways. For there is no deceit in my tongue. What meant he by this? Lo, I confess to You, I have walked in my own way, I have become far from You, I have departed from You, with whom it was well with me, and to my good it was ill with me without You....

5. Behold Thou, Lord, hast known all my last doings, and the ancient ones Psalm 138:5. You have known my latest doings, when I fed swine; You have known my ancient doings, when I asked of You my portion of goods. Ancient doings were the beginnings to me of latest ills: ancient sin, when we fell; latest punishment, when we came into this toilsome and dangerous mortality. And would that this may be latest to us; it will be, if now we will to return. For there is another latest for certain wicked ones, to whom it shall be said, Go ye into everlasting fire. Matthew 25:41 ...You have fashioned me, and hast laid Your hand upon me. Fashioned me, where? In this mortality; now, to the toils whereunto we all are born. For none is born, but God has fashioned him in his mother's womb; nor is there any creature, whereof God is not the Fashioner. But You have fashioned me in this toil, and laid Your hand upon me, Your avenging hand, putting down the proud. For thus healthfully has He cast down the proud, that He may lift him up humble.

6. Your skill has displayed itself wonderfully in me: it has waxed mighty: I shall not be able to attain unto it Psalm 138:6. Listen now and hear somewhat, which is obscure indeed, yet brings no small pleasure in the understanding thereon. Moses, the holy servant of God, with whom God spoke by a cloud, for, speaking

after human fashion, He must needs speak to His servant through some work of His hands which He assumed,...longed and desired to see the true appearance of God, and said to God, who was conversing with him, If now I have found grace in Your sight, show me Yourself. Exodus 33:13 When this he desired vehemently, and would extort from God in that sort of friendly familiarity, if we may so speak, wherewith God deigned to treat him, that he might see His Glory and His Face, in such wise as we can speak of God's Face, He said unto him, You can not see My Face; for no one has seen My Face, and lived; Exodus 33:20 but I will place you in a cleft of the rock, and will pass by, and will set My hand upon you; and when I have passed by, you shall see My back parts. And from these words there arises another enigma, that is, an obscure figure of the truth. When I have passed by, says God, you shall see My back parts; as though He has on one side His face, on another His back. Far be it from us to have any such thoughts of that Majesty! For whoso has such thoughts of God, what advantages it him that the temples are closed? He is building an idol in his own heart. In these words then are mighty mysteries....They who raged against the Lord, whom they saw, now seek counsel how they may be saved; and it is said to them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the Name of Jesus Christ, and your sins shall be forgiven you. Acts 2:38 Behold, they saw the back parts of Him, whose face they could not see. For His Hand was upon their eyes, not for ever, but while He passed by. After He had passed He took away His Hand from their eyes. When the hand was taken from their eyes, they say to the disciples, What shall we do? At first they are fierce, afterwards loving; at first angry, afterwards fearful; at first hard, then pleasant; at first blind, then enlightened....

7. Behold you find that the runaway in a far country cannot escape His eyes, from whom he flees. And whither can he go now, whose limit is tracked out? Behold, what says he? Whither shall I go from Your Spirit? Psalm 138:7. Who can in the world flee from that Spirit, with whom the world is filled? Wisdom 1:7 And whither shall I flee from Your Face? He seeks a place whither to flee from the wrath of God. What place will shelter God's runaway? Men who shelter runaways, ask them from whom they have fled; and when they find any one a slave of some master less powerful than themselves, him they shelter as it were without any fear, saying in their hearts, he has not a master by whom he can be tracked out. But when they are told of a powerful master, they either shelter not, or they shelter with great fear, because even a powerful man can be deceived. Where is God not? Who can deceive God? Whom does not God see? From whom does not God demand His runaway? Whither then shall that runaway go from the Face of God? He turns him hither and there, as though seeking a spot to flee to.

8. If I go up, says he, to heaven, You are there: if I go down to Hades, You are present Psalm 138:8. At length, miserable runaway, you have learned, that by no means can you make yourself far from Him, from whom you have wished to remove far away. Behold, He is everywhere; thou, whither will you go? He has found counsel, and that inspired by Him, who now deigns to recall him....If by sinning I go down to the depths of wickednesses, and spurn to confess, saying, Who sees me (for in Hades who shall confess to You? ) there also You are present, to punish. Whither then shall I go that I may flee from Your presence, that is, not find You angry? This plan he found: So will I flee, says he, from Your Face, so will I flee from Your Spirit; from Your avenging Spirit, Your avenging Face thus will I flee. How? If I take again my wings right forward, and abide in the utmost parts of the sea Psalm 138:9. So can I flee from Your Face. If he will flee to the utmost part of the sea from the Face of God, will not He from whom he flees be there?...For what are the utmost parts of the sea, but the end of the world? Thither let us now flee in hope and longing, with the wings of twofold love; let us have no rest, save in the utmost parts of the sea. For if elsewhere we wish for rest, we shall be hurled headlong into the sea. Let us fly even to the ends of the sea, let us bear ourselves aloft on the wings of twofold love; meanwhile let us flee to God in hope, and in faithful hope let

us meditate on that end of the sea.

9. Now listen who may bring us there. The very same One whose face in wrath we wish to flee from. For what follows? Even there shall Your hand conduct me, and Your right hand lead me Psalm 138:10. This let us meditate on, beloved brethren, let this be our hope, this our consolation. Let us take again through love the wings we lost through lust. For lust was the lime of our wings, it clashed us down from the freedom of our sky, that is, the free breezes of the Spirit of God. Thence dashed down we lost our wings, and were, so to speak, imprisoned in the power of the fowler; thence He redeemed us with His Blood, whom we fled from to be caught. He makes us wings of His commandments; we raise them aloft now free from lime....Needs then must we have wings, and needs must He conduct us, for He is our Helper. We have free-will; but even with that free-will what can we do, unless He help us who commands us?

10. And considering the length of the way, what said he to himself? And I said, Peradventure the darkness shall overwhelm me<sup>11</sup>. Lo, now I have believed in Christ, now am I wafted aloft on the wings of twofold love....Regarding the length of the way, I said to myself, And the night was light in my delight. The night was made to me light, because in the night I despaired of being able to cross so great a sea, to surmount so long a journey, to reach the utmost parts by persevering to the end. Thanks to Him who sought me when a runaway, who smote my back with strokes of the scourge, who by calling me recalled me from destruction, who made my night light. For it is night so long as we are passing through this life. How was the night made light? Because Christ came down into the night....

11. For darkness shall not be darkened by You Psalm 138:12. Do not thou then darken your darkness; God darkens it not, but enlightens it yet more; for to Him is said in another Psalm, You, Lord, shall light my candle: my God shall enlighten my darkness. But who are they who darken their darkness, which God darkens not? Evil men, perverse men; when they sin, verily they are darkness; when they confess not their sins which they have committed but go on to defend them, they darken their darkness. Wherefore now if you have sinned you are in darkness, but by confessing your darkness you shall obtain to have your darkness lightened; by defending your darkness, you shall darken your darkness. And where will you escape from double darkness, who wast in difficulty in single darkness?...Let us not darken our darkness by defending our sins, and the night shall be light in our delight.

12. And night shall be lightened as the day. Night, as the day. Day to us is worldly prosperity, night adversity in this world: but, if we learn that it is by the desert of our sins that we suffer adversities, and our Father's scourges are sweet to us, that the Judge's sentence may not be bitter to us, so shall we find the darkness of this night to be, as it were, the light of this night....But when Christ our Lord has come, and has dwelt in the soul by faith, and promised other light, and inspired and given patience, and warned a man not to delight in prosperity or to be crushed by adversity, the man, being faithful, begins to treat this world with indifference; not to be lifted up when prosperity befalls him, nor crushed when adversity, but in all things to praise God, not only when he abounds, but also when he loses; not only when he is in health, but also when he is sick.. ..As is His darkness, so is also His light. His darkness overwhelms me not, because His light lifts me not up.

13. For Thou, O Lord, hast possessed my reins Psalm 138:13. The Possessor is within; He occupies not only the heart, but also the reins; not only the thoughts, but also the delights: He then possesses that whence I should feel delight at any light in this world: He occupies my reins: I know not delight, save from the inward light of His Wisdom. What then? Do you not delight that your affairs are very prosperous, times fortunate to you? Do you not delight in honour, in riches, in your family? I do not, says he. Wherefore?

Because You have possessed my reins, O Lord; You have taken me up from my mother's womb. While I was in my mother's womb, I did not regard with indifference the darkness of that night and the light of that night....Now, having been taken up from the womb of that our mother, we look on them with indifference, and say, As is His darkness, so is also His light. Neither does earthly prosperity make us happy, nor earthly adversity wretched. We must maintain righteousness, love faith, hope in God, love God, love our neighbours also. After these toils we shall have unfailing light, day without setting. Fleeting is all the light and darkness of this night.

14. I will confess to You, O Lord, for terribly have You been made wonderful: wondrous are Your works, and my soul knows it right well Psalm 138:14. Aforetime Your knowledge was made wonderful from me, it had waxed great, nor could I attain unto it. From me then it had waxed great. Whence does my soul now know right well, save because the night is light in my delight? save because Your grace has come unto me, and enlightened my darkness? save because You have possessed my reins? save because You have taken me up from my mother's womb?

15. My bone is not hid from You, which You have made in secret Psalm 138:15. His bone, he says. What the people call ossum, is in Latin called os. This is the word in the Greek. For we might think the word os is here the one which makes in the plural ora, not os (short), which makes ossa. He says then, I have a certain bone (ossum) in secret. For this word let us prefer to use; better is it that scholars find fault with us, than that the people understand us not. There is then, says he, a certain bone of mine, within, hidden; You have made within a bone for me in secret, yet is it not hidden from You. In secret have You made it, but have You therefore hidden it from Yourself? This my bone made by You in secret men see not, men know not: You know, who hast made. What bone then means he, brethren? Let us seek it, it is in secret. But because as Christians we are speaking in the Name of the Lord to Christians, now we find what bone is of this kind. It is a sort of inward strength; for strength and fortitude are understood to be in the bones. There is then a sort of inward strength of the soul, wherein it is not broken. Whatever tortures, whatever tribulations, whatever adversities rage around, that which God has made strong in secret in us, cannot be broken, yields not. For by God is made a certain strength of patience, of which is said in another Psalm, But my soul shall be subjected to God, for of Him is my patience.. ..Wherein do you glory? In tribulations, knowing that tribulation works patience. Romans 4:5 See how that strength is fashioned within in his heart: because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us. So is fashioned and made strong that hidden bone, that it makes us even to glory in tribulations. But to men we seem wretched, because that which we have within is hidden from them. And my substance is in the lower parts of the earth. Behold, in flesh is my substance, yet have I a bone within, which You have fashioned, such as to cause me never to yield to any persecutions of this lower region, where still my substance is. For what great matter is it, if an Angel be brave? This is a great matter, if flesh is brave. And whence is flesh brave, whence is an earthen vessel brave, save because in it is made a bone in secret?

16. ...Your eyes did see Mine imperfect one, and in Your book shall all be written Psalm 138:16, not only the perfect, but also the imperfect. Let not the imperfect fear, only let them advance. Nor yet, because I have said, let them not fear, let them love their imperfection, and remain there, where they are found. Let them advance, as far as in them lies. Daily let them add, daily let them approach; yet let them not fall back from the Body of the Lord: that, compacted in one Body and among these members, they may be counted worthy to have that said of them. By day shall they wander, and none among them. The Day was yet on earth, even our Lord Jesus Christ. Whence He said, Walk while you have the day. John 12:35 But by day shall His imperfect ones wander. They too thought that our Lord Jesus Christ was only man, that He had

not within Him the hidden Godhead, that He was not secretly God, but that He was that only which was seen: this they too thought...But what is, In the day they shall wander? Shall they perish? Where then is, In Your book shall all be written? When then did they wander in the day? When they understood not the Lord set upon earth. And what follows? But to me Your friends are made very honourable, O God Psalm 138:17; those very ones, who wandered in the day, and none was in them, became Your friends, and were made very honourable to me. That bone was made in them in secret after the resurrection of the Lord, and they suffered for His Name, at whose death they had been amazed. Mightily strengthened were their chieftainships. They became Apostles, they became leaders of the Church, they became rams leading their flocks, mightily strengthened.

17. I will number them, and they shall be multiplied above the sand Psalm 138:18. By means of them, who wandered in the day, lo! There has been born all this great multitude, which now is like the sand innumerable, save by God. For He said, they shall be multiplied above the sand, and yet He had said, I will number them. The very same who are numbered, shall be multiplied above the sand. For by Him is the sand numbered, by whom the very hairs of our head are numbered. Matthew 10:30 I have risen, and yet am I with You. Already have I suffered, says He, already have I been buried; lo! I have risen, and not yet do they understand that I am with them. Yet am I with You, that is, not yet with them, for not yet do they recognise Me. For thus do we read in the Gospel, that after the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, when He appeared to them, they did not at once know Him. There is another meaning also: I have risen, and yet am I with You, as though He would signify this present time, wherein He is as yet hidden at the right hand of the Father, before He is revealed in the brightness, wherein He shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

18. And then He tells what meanwhile, during this whole time when He already has risen, and remains still with the Father, He suffers by the intermixture of sinners in His Body, the Church, and by the separation of heretics. If Thou, O God, shall slay the sinners (since You shall say in Your thought, Depart from Me, you men of blood), they shall receive in vanity their cities (ver. 19-20). The words seem to be connected in this order; If Thou, O God, shall slay the sinners, they shall receive in vanity their cities.

Thus are sinners slain, because, having their understandings darkened, they are alienated from the life of God. Ephesians 4:18 For on account of elation they lose confession, and so they are slain, and in them is fulfilled what Scripture says, Confession perishes from the dead, as from one that is not. Sirach 17:28 And so they receive in vanity their cities, that is, their vain peoples, who follow their vanity; when, puffed up by the name of righteousness, they persuade men to burst the bond of unity, and blindly and ignorantly follow them, as being more righteous....But now the Body of Christ, the Church, says, Why do the proud speak falsely against me, as though I were stained by other men's sins, and so, by separating themselves, receive in vanity their cities?

Have not I hated those who hated You, Lord? Psalm 138:21. Why do those who are worse themselves require of me to separate myself in body as well as spirit from the wicked, so as to root up the wheat, together with the tares, before the time of harvest, that before the time of winnowing I lose my power of enduring the chaff; that before all the different sorts of fishes are brought to the end of the world, as to the shore, to be separated, I tear the nets of peace and unity? Are the sacraments which I receive, those of evil men?

Do I; by consent, communicate in their life and deeds?...But where is, Love your enemies? Is it because He said yours, not God's? Do good to them that hate you. Matthew 5:44 He says not, who hate God. So

he follows the pattern, and says, Have not I hated those who hated You; Lord? He says not, Who have hated me. And at Your enemies did I waste away. Yours, he said, not mine. But those who hate us and are enemies unto us, only because we serve Him, what else do they but hate Him, and are His enemies.

Ought we then to love such enemies as these? Or do not they suffer persecution for God's sake, to whom it is said, Pray for them that persecute you? Observe then what follows. With a perfect hatred did I hate them Psalm 138:22. What is, with a perfect hatred? I hated in them their iniquities, I loved Your creation. This it is to hate with a perfect hatred, that neither on account of the vices thou hate the men, nor on account of the men love the vices. For see what he adds, They became mine enemies.

Not only as God's enemies, but as his own too does he now describe them. How then will he fulfil in them both his own saying, Have not I hated those that hated You, Lord, and the Lord's command, Love your enemies? How will he fulfil this, save with that perfect hatred, that he hate in them that they are wicked, and love that they are men? For in the time even of the Old Testament, when the carnal people was restrained by visible punishments, how did Moses, the servant of God, who by understanding belonged to the New Testament, how did he hate sinners when he prayed for them, or how did he not hate them when he slew them, save that he hated them with a perfect hatred? For with such perfection did he hate the iniquity which he punished, as to love the manhood for which he prayed.

19. Since then the Body of Christ is in the end to be severed in body also from the unholy and wicked, but now meanwhile groans among them, what does the love of Christ among the daughters, as the lily among thorns? Song of Songs 2:2 What are her words? What her conscience? What is the appearance of the king's daughter within? Lo, hear what she says. Prove me, O God, and know my heart Psalm 138:23. Do Thou, O God, Thou prove me, Thou know; not man, not an heretic, who neither knows how to prove, nor can know my heart, whereas You prove, and know that I consent not to the deeds of the wicked, while they think that I can be defiled by the sins of others; so that, while I in my long wandering do what I mourn in another Psalm, that is, while I labour for peace among them that hate peace, until I come to that Vision of peace, which is called Jerusalem, which is the mother of us all, the city eternal in the heavens; they, contending, and falsely accusing and separating themselves, may receive, not, evidently, in eternity, but in vanity, their cities. Why this? Observe what follows.

20. And see, says he, if there be any way of wickedness in me, and lead me in the way everlasting Psalm 138:24. Search, he says, my paths, that is, my counsels and thoughts. What else says he, but lead me in Christ? For who is the way everlasting, save He that is the life everlasting? For everlasting is He who said, I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life. John 14:6 If then you find anything in my way which displeases Your eyes, since my way is mortal, do Thou lead me in the way everlasting, wherein is no iniquity; for even if any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and He is the propitiation for our sins; 1 John 2:1-2 He is the Way everlasting without sin; He is the Life everlasting without punishment.

21. These are great mysteries, brethren. How does the Spirit of God speak with us? How does it make us delights in this night? What is this, we ask you, brethren, whence are they sweeter, the darker they are? He mixes us our potion after His love, in certain wondrous ways. He makes His own sayings wondrous, so that while we were speaking what ye already knew, yet forasmuch as it was dug out of passages which seemed obscure, the knowledge itself seemed to be made new. Did ye not know, brethren, that the wicked are to be tolerated in the Church, and schisms not to be made? Did ye not already know, that within those nets which hold both good and bad fishes, we must abide even to the shore, nor must the

nets be burst, because on the shore the good shall be separated into vessels, and the bad thrown away? You know this already; but these verses of this Psalm ye did not understand; that which you did not understand is explained; that which you knew has been renewed.

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