**THE SANCTITY OF LIFE**

**LIFE BELONGS TO GOD**

**Psalm 139:1-18**

**INTRODUCTION**

I must begin this sermon with a confession: I think too little, do too little, and care too little about the evil of abortion.

Last year, I decided to begin an annual tradition in our church of preaching on the sanctity of life on the last Sunday of every month. I chose that day because it is the Sunday that falls closest to the anniversary of the Supreme Court of Canada’s decision in *R. v. Morgentaler*. *Morgentaler* was the court case that opened the floodgates for legal abortions in Canada.

Those who are familiar with American history will know that *Morgentaler* followed the American case of *Roe v. Wade*, which recognized a constitutional right to abortion in the United States. Since then, a small group of pastors in the US has decided to hold a “Sanctity of Life Sunday” every year. Their example has been the main inspiration for my decision to do the same in our church.

Last year, I preached on Proverbs 24:11. I chose that text because I was convinced that “Every Bible-believing Christian believes that abortion is wrong, but not every Christian believes that God is calling them to do something about it.” I wanted to show you from the Scriptures that God has given his people a *positive* command – a command to *do* something, not just a *negative* command to *not* do something – when it comes to abortion, and it is this: “Rescue those who are being taken away to death; hold back those who are stumbling to the slaughter.”

There are approximately 100,000 abortions every year in Canada. 100,000 tiny human beings are being taken away to death, and God’s call to us is “Rescue them! Hold them back! Don’t let them be taken away to be slaughtered.” That’s what I preached last year at our first Sanctity of Life Sunday.

And yet, following that message, I found myself doing almost *nothing* in response. Yes, Nina and I became monthly supporters of a pregnancy care center in Toronto, and I wrote an article for The Gospel Coalition Canada about abortion, but within a few short weeks of my sermon, my thoughts about abortion fizzled out, and I barely thought about it for the rest of the year.

That changed two weeks ago. I knew that *this* Sunday, Sanctity of Life Sunday 2019, was coming up, and I needed to prepare. I began to read as many books about abortion as I could get, not just so that I could have the right *thoughts* about abortion, but so that I could have the right *feelings* about abortion. I needed my heart to break all over again for the thousands of babies who are murdered every year in the womb.

And though I’m not yet where I need to be, I think I’m a little closer than I was two weeks ago, and the ironic thing is that I didn’t get here just by thinking about abortion. I got here by thinking about the wonder and beauty of *human life*.

That’s why I’ve chosen to preach from Psalm 139, which in my opinion is one of the most, if not *the* most profound celebrations of the mystery and beauty of human life that I’ve ever read.

I’m going to begin with a brief exposition of the Psalm, because we want to root our thoughts in the Word of God, followed by some thoughts on how this applies to the great evil that is abortion.

The title of this sermon is **Life Belongs to God*.*** My aim today is to show you that **Defending Life Comes From Celebrating Life.** The message is broken up into two parts today:

1. The Meaning of the Psalm
2. The Application of the Psalm

(1) **THE MEANING OF THE PSALM**

Psalm 139 was written by King David, who opens the Psalm with a meditation on God’s omniscience. Most of us know that omniscience is one of the three “omnis” we use to describe God. He is “omnipotent” (all-powerful), he is “omnipresent” (all-present), and he is “omniscient” (all knowing). God knows *all things*. Think about that for a moment. He knows everything about science, whether it be the laws of thermodynamics or quantum physics. He knows everything about history, everything that has ever happened, and everything that will happen. He knows everything about geography, like the topography of the Rocky Mountains, and the location of even the smallest stream. He knows everything about languages, cultures, literature, art, and mathematics. He knows *all* things.

I love how Wayne Grudem describes God’s omniscience. He writes:

“God is always fully aware of everything. If he should wish to tell us the number of grains of sand on the seashore or the number of stars in the sky, he would not have to count them all quickly like some kind of giant computer, nor would he have to call the number to mind because it was something he had not thought about for a time. Rather, he always knows all things at once…and he never learns and never forgets anything.” (Systematic Theology)

God knows *all things*, and in verses 1-4, David meditates on the reality that God knows all things about *him*. In verse 1, he says “O LORD, you have searched me and known me!” This language of *searching* implies a thoroughness to God’s knowledge, like God has gone over David with a fine tooth comb and knows every single detail about who he is.

More than that, God knows every single detail about what he *does*.In verse 2, David says, “You know when I sit down and when I rise up”. Nothing, not even the most innocuous acts of sitting down and rising up, escapes God’s attention and knowledge.

David continues in verse 2: “you discern my thoughts from afar.” Now we’re getting into the realm of the divine. Anyone can gather knowledge about your physical actions. Anyone can observe when you sit and when you rise, but no one but God can observe your *thoughts*. God knows all things, whether external or internal, whether visible or invisible, whether acted out in the body or hidden in the mind.

David summarizes all this well in verse 3 when he writes, “You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with *all* my ways.”

That would have been a fitting end to this meditation on God’s omniscience, but David still isn’t satisfied. He presses into the doctrine of God’s omniscience and comes up with verse 4: “Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O LORD, you know it altogether”! This is incredible. God doesn’t just know all things. He knows all things that *will be*. Grudem said that “God always knows all things at once... and he never learns and never forgets anything”, and we see that demonstrated here. God doesn’t come to know the things we say at the moment that we say them, or the things we do at the moment that we do them. God never *learns* anything. He always knows all things at once, whether they be things we’ve already done or said, or things we are yet to do or say.

For some, thinking about God’s omniscience is a *terrifying* prospect. God knows *everything* I do, say, and think? That sounds oppressive. That sounds Orwellian. That sounds like it’s “big brother” to the extreme, where a being with absolute power knows absolutely everything about you. In a culture that exalts privacy like ours, this sounds like the worst possible kind of life. We want to be able to do what we want, when we want, without having to worry about who might be watching us.

But that’s not how David responds to God’s omniscience. Verse 5: “You hem me in, behind and before.” David doesn’t see God as an oppressor. He sees him as a *protector*. He sees God as surrounding him, not to restrict him, but to protect him from external threats. God is mighty to save. He is a strong defender, a refuge in times of trouble, and a shield from David’s enemies. And he does all this with tenderness, or as David puts it in verse 5, God lays his hand upon him like a protective father, assuring him that he is with him and watching over him.

David isn’t afraid of God’s omniscience, because he knows the One who knows him. He is his guardian, his protector, his *loving* lord. And this leads him to worship in verse 6: ‘Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it.” Alec Motyer writes,

“(Here is) omniscience, not formulated as a doctrine, but confessed in adoration.”

David is in awe, that the one who knows him completely also loves him completely; that the one who knows his sinful thoughts and hurtful words is *for* him, not *against* him.

The same is true for all who trust in Christ. God knows you completely. He knows your sitting down and rising up. He discerns your thoughts from afar. He is acquainted with all your ways. Even before a word is on *your* tongue, the Lord knows it altogether. He knows all your sins: past, present, and future. He knows all your sinful *thoughts*, your greed, your idolatry, your coveting, your lust. He knows all your sinful *words*, the hurtful things you said to your loved ones, the words you wish you could take back but can’t. He always knows everything about you at once, never learning or forgetting anything about you, *and yet*, if you’re a Christian, God is *for* you, not against you. If you repent of your sins and believe that Jesus died on the cross for your sins, God hems you in, behind and before, not to restrict you, but to protect you. God lays his hand upon you, not to punish you, but to comfort you. Truly, such knowledge is too wonderful for us; it is high; we cannot attain it.

After reflecting on God’s omniscience, David switches gears in verses 7-12 to meditate on God’s *omnipresence*. God isn’t just “all knowing”. He is also “all present”. He is present everywhere. David illustrates this by using three sets of contrasts. The first is heaven/sheol in verse 8. Heaven was the high dwelling place of God. Sheol was the low dwelling place of the dead. Whether David ascended to heaven or made his bed in Sheol, he knew God would be there.

The second is the east and west in verse 9. The “wings of the morning” symbolized the eastern horizon, and the “uttermost parts of the sea” stood for the western horizon. Whether David went east or west, he knew that “even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me.”

The third contrast between light and dark in verse 11 is a little different. Unlike the first two contrasts, David isn’t saying that God is in the light and in the dark. He’s saying that, where God is, there *is* no dark. As verse 12 puts it, “even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you.” When David is surrounded by darkness, whether it be the darkness of suffering or sin, he knows that God will meet him there and turn his darkness to light.

This leads to the heart of our text for our purposes today. As David remembers that God knows him completely and is with him even in the covering of darkness, his thoughts turn to another time when God was with him in the darkness: inside his mother’s womb. Even before he was born, when his organs were still developing, when his skeleton was beginning to take shape, when his arms and legs were but little buds on his tiny body, God was with him in that watery world, intimately forming him with the utmost care and precision.

In verse 13, David says “you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother’s womb”. The Hebrew word here for “inward parts” is “kidneys”, a word David may have been using to reference all of his internal organs. Another possible interpretation is that David is talking about his emotions, since the kidneys were seen as the seat of the emotions. Whatever it means, David’s point is that God created all of him, even the most intimate parts of him.

As David meditates on this, his thoughts turn to praise in verse 14: “I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well.” David has firsthand experience of God’s wonderful works, because he has a body wonderfully made by God himself.

David then uses the metaphor of sight in verse 15, which recalls the language of God “searching” him in verse 1. The LORD who searches him saw him when he was being made in secret, “intricately woven in the depths of the earth.” Then again in verse 16: “Your eyes *saw* my unformed substance”, literally “Your eyes saw my *embryo*”, the small clump of cells that marks the beginning of a human being’s life. But even then, God *knew* him. Indeed, every one of David’s days were written in God’s book of life when as yet there was none of them.

David ends this section of the Psalm with praise to the God who knows him and who has always been with him: “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.”

(2) **THE APPLICATION OF THE PSALM**

Now I want to focus on three implications from our Psalm that apply to the sanctity of life and to abortion.

**(a) Human Life is Sacred Because God Has Made it Sacred**

Psalm 139 gives us an intimate picture of how personally involved God is in the creation of human life. It was *God* who formed us. It was *God* who knitted us together. From the time of conception, every one of us has been fashioned and nurtured by God himself. He looked upon our unformed substance and superintended our growth, from the time we existed merely as a single cell formed by the joining of a reproductive cell from our father, and a reproductive cell from our mother, until this very day. God *saw* us. God *made* us. And God *loved* us.

Nothing else in creation enjoys such intimacy with God. Genesis 1 tells us that, when God created the world, he brought all things into being by simply speaking them into existence. “Let there be trees; plants; birds; beasts; great sea creatures of the deep; creeping things.” It’s a rapid-fire burst of creation as God fills the earth with life. God spoke, and it was so, and all of it was good.

But then, when it came to the creation of humanity, the narrative slows down. God doesn’t just speak humanity into existence. He fashions them with his own hands and gave them his divine breath. Genesis 2:7 says,

“Then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.”

The same was true of the first woman. God made Eve out of one of Adam’s ribs and presented her to Adam himself. Why did God create humanity with such tenderness and care? Because God made mankind *in his image*. He made humanity to distinctly reflect the perfection of his character in a way that nothing else in creation can.

This is why human life is sacred. It’s sacred because God made us sacred, and that means that, if you are human, whether you are twenty years old or just conceived, whether you stand 6’5” or it takes a microscope to see you, whether you live independently or live completely dependent on your mother’s womb, your life is *sacred*.

The amazing thing is that secular, pro-abortion people actually agree that human life is sacred. Just look at the Supreme Court of Canada. In the 2015 case of *Carter v. Canada* (which was ironically the case that opened the door to physician-assisted suicide in Canada), the unanimous court wrote,

“The sanctity of life is one of our most fundamental societal values. Section 7 (of the Charter) is rooted in a profound respect for the value of human life.” (para. 63)

Sanctity of life is said to be a deeply cherished value in Canadian society, and yet, those who support abortion refuse to ascribe the sanctity of life to the unborn. Why? Because that’s the only way they can justify killing them. If every human life was sacred, regardless of level of development, regardless of size, regardless of whether it was dependent on another for survival, then people would see abortion completely differently than they do today. Abortion on demand would be as morally repugnant as the murder of innocent people.

But that’s not a conclusion they’re willing to draw, so they have to root the sanctity of life in something else. They say it’s rooted in our ability to think rationally, or in our self-awareness, or in our autonomy to make our own decisions and take care of ourselves. The problem with all these theories is that they would exclude huge categories of people that we typically *do* ascribe the sanctity of life to. Babies don’t think rationally. They’re not self-aware. Many of the elderly aren’t autonomous. Are we willing to say that babies are less human than adults, or that the elderly become less human the more dependent they become? Of course not. If we’re not willing to say that babies and the elderly are sub-human, then we shouldn’t be willing to say that the unborn are sub-human either. They are fully *human*, just as much as you and I are human, and therefore, their lives should be protected by the same sanctity of life principles as ours.

(b) **Embryos Don’t Become Human; They *Are* Human**

This is related to our second point: embryos don’t become human; they *are* human. We see that in the way David speaks about his pre-born self in verses 13-16. David says, “It was *me* whom God knitted together in my mother’s womb.” Not a glob of cells that would eventually become me. It was *me*. *My* frame was not hidden from God, when *I* was being made in secret. God’s eyes saw *my* unformed substance, *my* embryo. There’s no denying that, when David wrote Psalm 139 under God’s divine inspiration, he didn’t see God as working with some cells that would eventually turn into a human being. He saw God as working on *him*, from the time he was still an embryo to the time he was born.

This is a well-established scientific fact. Christian and non-Christian geneticists agree that, as soon as a human egg is fertilized, a distinct, *human* individual comes into being. The humanity of the being comes from the fact that it has human DNA, which is the blueprint for life. It’s not gorilla DNA. It’s not DNA that eventually becomes human. It is human DNA from the very start. 46 chromosomes. 23 from a human father, and 23 from a human mother.

And what’s incredible is that the DNA of that tiny human being is completely distinct from the DNA of other human beings. It’s like how each of us have completely unique fingerprints. Every child has his or her own unique set of DNA. Even the mother’s DNA doesn’t match. Every cell of the mother’s body contains exactly the same DNA, but the baby growing inside her has completely different DNA (which, by the way, is one reason why women don’t have the same rights over the babies growing inside them as they do over their own body parts).

The pro-abortion side doesn’t get this. I once had a friend defend abortion in the early stages of development by saying that aborting a baby in the early stages was no different from scraping off a few skin cells from your arm. That’s not scientifically correct. Yes, human beings only start off as microscopic beings that look just like a clump of cells, but they are so much more than that. If you take a clump of my skin cells and put them in a human uterus, they’re not going to do anything except die. But if you take the cells of a fertilized egg and put them in a uterus, they’ll rapidly start multiplying and growing into a completely distinct human being. Embryos don’t become human. From the moment of conception, they *are* human.

This is an important reminder, not only for those who are pro-abortion, but for those who are pro-life. As a pro-lifer, when I read abortion statistics, I tend to find some comfort in the fact that most abortions happen in the first trimester (or the first 12 weeks of pregnancy), and only a few happen in the third trimester (which begins in the 28th week of pregnancy). But why should I be comforted by that? Yes, the destruction of a human being is less graphic in the early stages, but it doesn’t change the fact that a distinct, human individual is being destroyed.

A first trimester abortion is just as tragic as a third trimester abortion. We need to realize that. One thing that has helped me to grasp this personally is thinking about how a baby grows in the first trimester. Randy Alcorn helpfully sets out the facts as follows:

* 5-9 days: the new person burrows into the womb’s wall for safety and nourishment. Already the gender can be determined by scientific means
* 18 days: the heart is forming and eyes start to develop
* 21 days: the heart pumps blood throughout the body
* 28 days: the unborn has budding arms and legs
* 30 days: she has a brain and has multiplied in size ten thousand times
* 35 days: her mouth, ears, and nose are taking shape
* 40 days: the child’s brain waves can be recorded and heartbeat can be detected
* 42 days: the skeleton is formed and her brain is controlling the movement of muscles and organs
* 45 days: all the internal organs are in development. She already has a little mouth with lips, and early tongue and buds for 20 teeth.
* 56 days: hands and feet are almost perfectly formed
* 9 weeks: a child will bend fingers around an object placed in the palm. Fingernails are forming, and the child can be sucking his thumb
* 10 weeks: the child squints, swallows, and frowns

Alcorn summarizes:

“All this happens in the first trimester, the first three months of life. In the remaining six months in the womb, nothing new develops or begins functioning. The fully intact child only grows and matures – unless her life is lost by spontaneous miscarriage or taken through abortion.” – Randy Alcorn

Embryos don’t become human. They *are* human, and therefore, the destruction of an embryo, even in the earliest stages of development, means the destruction of a distinct, human life.

(c) **Every Abortion Ends a Life Meticulously Planned by God**

Our final point is this: every abortion ends a life meticulously planned by God. We’ve thought a lot about the doctrine of God’s omniscience today, but there’s one element of that doctrine that I haven’t addressed. God doesn’t just know all things, what has been and will be. He also knows what *could* have been. He knows the endless possibilities that never become realities, what your life would have been like if you married so and so instead of your spouse, or if you had been raised in a different country, or if you had gone to a different school. He knows all things that might have happened that never actually come to pass.

For example, in 1 Samuel 23, David is fleeing from Saul to the city of Keilah, but before he arrives, he asks God two questions: will Saul follow him to Keilah, and will the people of Keilah betray him and deliver him to Saul? God’s answer to both of these questions is “yes”, and because of that, David never enters Keilah but chooses to flee elsewhere. Saul didn’t follow David to Keilah, and the people of Keilah didn’t betray David, but God knew that they would have if David had gone to the city.

God knows all things that will be, and all things that *could* have been. He knows what our lives would have been like if we had made different choices, or met different people, or worked different jobs, or lived in a different city. And do you know what else he knows? *He knows what kinds of lives the unborn would have lived if they hadn’t been aborted*.

That’s what I think about when I read verse 16 and apply it to aborted babies. Verse 16 says, “In your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.” Every aborted child had a life to live, people to love, ways that they would have impacted the world, but all of it is gone because people decided to play God in deciding life and death.

**CONCLUSION**

Let me end with this. I used to practice law with a brilliant Catholic lawyer. This guy has a razor sharp mind and was doing incredibly well with his law practice (and to my knowledge, still is). I distinctly remember one conversation we had during a long drive back from Manitoulin Island where we were doing a case together. I remember talking to him about possibly becoming a full-time pastor one day, and I asked him if he could picture himself doing anything other than law. This was his reply: “Josh, one day I’d like to give up my law practice and go all-out in the pro-life movement.”

That’s an answer you will rarely hear from evangelical Christians like us, but it’s one I hope to hear more. Catholics may not have all the right theology, but they’ve gotten the sanctity of life right. We can and should learn from them, and join them in the cause of protecting the unborn.

Let me give you three things you can do to grow in your commitment to this cause.

First, I encourage you to read. Great thoughts come from great books, and the issue of the sanctity of life is no exception. Here are three books that have served me well over the past two weeks:

1. *Why Pro-Life* by Randy Alcorn
2. *Abortion: A Rational Look at An Emotional Issue* by R.C. Sproul
3. *The Case for Life: Equipping Christians to Engage the Culture* by Scott Klusendorf

Second, I encourage you to pray. We pray about the things we care for, and we care more about the things we pray for. Let’s regularly commit to praying for the unborn, and for their parents who are thinking of aborting them, in our personal prayer and in our corporate prayer.

Third, I encourage you to act. Pregnancy Care Centers need volunteers. There’s one just up in Newmarket that our family has made donations to. Perhaps the Lord is raising up some of you to be speak on behalf of the unborn in schools or info sessions. Perhaps the Lord is raising up some of you to become politicians and to speak up for the unborn in Parliament.

I have personally wondered whether the Lord might raise up some of the women in our church to champion this cause. Abortion isn’t just a women’s issue, but women have a distinct platform to speak into it, because let’s be honest, men don’t fully understand what’s going through a pregnant woman’s mind, or what pregnancy does to her body. Women do. Women carry a credibility on this issue that men can never have.

Ladies, have you wondered how the Lord might use you to serve him and glorify him? It may be that he is calling you to speak up for the unborn, to advocate for their lives, and to counsel and care for the mothers who are considering abortion. That is my hope and prayer, that our church would become known for our good works in protecting and celebrating the sanctity of life.