GUIDELINES

BIBLE STUDY FOR TODAY'S MINISTRY AND MISSION

BRF

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Edited by **Rachel Tranter** and **Olivia Warburton**

Suggestions for using *Guidelines*

Set aside a regular time and place, if possible, when and where you can read and pray undisturbed. Before you begin, take time to be still and, if you find it helpful, use the BRF Ministries prayer on page 6.

In *Guidelines*, the introductory section provides context for the passages or themes to be studied, while the units of comment can be used daily, weekly or whatever best fits your timetable. You will need a Bible (more than one if you want to compare different translations) as Bible passages are not included. Please don't be tempted to skip the Bible reading because you know the passage well. We will have utterly failed if we don't bring our readers into engagement with the word of God. At the end of each week is a 'Guidelines' section, offering further thoughts about, or practical application of, what you have been studying.

Occasionally, you may read something in *Guidelines* that you find particularly challenging, even uncomfortable. This is inevitable in a series of notes which draws on a wide spectrum of contributors and doesn't believe in ducking difficult issues. Indeed, we believe that *Guidelines* readers much prefer thought-provoking material to a bland diet that only confirms what they already think.

If you do disagree with a contributor, you may find it helpful to go through these three steps. First, think about why you feel uncomfortable. Perhaps this is an idea that is new to you, or you are not happy about the way something has been expressed. Or there may be something more substantial – you may feel that the writer is guilty of sweeping generalisation, factual error, or theological or ethical misjudgement. Second, pray that God would use this disagreement to teach you more about his word and about yourself. Third, have a deeper read about the issue. There are further reading suggestions at the end of each writer's block of notes. And then, do feel free to write to the contributor or the editor of *Guidelines*. We welcome communication, by email, phone or letter, as it enables us to discover what has been useful, challenging or infuriating for our readers. We don't always promise to change things, but we will always listen and think about your ideas, complaints or suggestions. Thank you!

To send feedback, please email **enquiries@brf.org.uk**, phone **+44 (0)1865 319700** or write to the address shown opposite.

Writers in this issue

Amy Scott Robinson is the author of *Image of the Invisible* (BRF Ministries, 2019) and *Images of Grace* (BRF Ministries, 2022). She has also written children's books and other resources, and is a contributor to the *Church Times*.

Isabelle Hamley is principal of Ridley Hall, a theological college in Cambridge. She is a speaker, writer and broadcaster who is passionate about scripture and how it can shape the life of the church.

Charmaine Mhlanga is a Baptist minister serving at Sundon Park Baptist Church in Bedfordshire. Charmaine has interests and involvement with matters of racial equality and justice, science and technology and leadership.

Ian Paul is a theologian, biblical scholar and local church leader in the Church of England. After a decade in pastoral ministry and another in theological education, he now writes at both academic and popular levels, and is a freelance teacher, publishing at the widely read blog **psephizo.com**.

Sharon Prentis is an ordained priest and deputy director of the Church of England's Racial Justice Unit. She was previously dean of ministry at St Mellitus Theological College in London.

Ashley Hibbard is director of operations at the Centre for the Study of Bible and Violence, and the lead editor (with Helen Paynter) of the *Journal for the Study of Bible and Violence*. She also serves as an adjunct lecturer at Emmanuel Bible College, Kitchener, Canada, and African Christian College, Eswatini.

Nick Page is a writer, historian and podcaster. He is the author of over 80 books for adults and children, and is also creative lead at Open Doors UK and Ireland, an organisation which supports persecuted Christians around the world.

Andy Angel is the director of formation for ministry in the diocese of Oxford. Before this, he spent a decade in parish ministry and a decade teaching New Testament in theological colleges. He has written various books including *Playing with Dragons: Living with suffering and God* (Cascade, 2014).

M. J. Kramer is chaplain of Keble College, Oxford, having previously served as precentor of Canterbury Cathedral. His academic interests include classics, biblical studies and Hellenistic Judaism.

Joel Barker is professor of biblical studies at Heritage College and Seminary in Cambridge, Ontario, Canada. He is the author of a commentary on Joel (the Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the Old Testament series) and co-author of a commentary on Numbers in the Kerux series from Kregel Academic.

The editors write…

This issue of *Guidelines* is full of very good things!
In the run-up to Advent and Christmas, it's important to take
the time to prepare your heart and mind for the season; hopefully the issue
you have in your hands will be a helpful companion.

In the Old Testament, Ashley Hibbard tackles 1 Chronicles, while Joel
Barker reflects on Zechariah, which also addresses God's people post-exile.
These books show a people at a volatile turning point in their history, able
only to cling to the goodness of God. Perhaps we can relate in our own times.
Meanwhile Amy Scott Robinson looks at the Psalms through the lens of seeing
them as poetry; how can understanding the conventions of Hebrew poetry
enlighten our readings of the Psalms and turn them to prayer?

Our deep dive into Acts continues with Isabelle Hamley, who takes us
through this period of church growth as well as struggles. Ian Paul gives us
a whistle-stop tour through the short books of 1, 2 and 3 John, while Sharon
Prentis focuses on the parables of Jesus in the book of Matthew.

Nick Page, who works for Open Doors, has provided two weeks of study on
persecution, focusing on the New Testament experience of persecution and
the parallels with the persecuted church today. He invites us to think about
what this means for how we express our faith in our culture, and, ultimately,
how we respond to the persecution and suffering of our worldwide family.

As we move into Advent, we spend two weeks with Max Kramer as he
reflects on signs of Jesus' coming. Using both familiar and less familiar Advent
readings, he invites us to read these passages in their full context instead of
cherry-picking particular verses, as often happens.

Finally, we have two fascinating sets of thematic notes. Charmaine Mhlanga
reflects on AI (artificial intelligence) and asks rather than answers plenty of
questions about this up-and-coming technology and how we might respond
to it. Andy Angel, meanwhile, explores the common biblical myth of God as a
divine warrior figure, and how the biblical authors used this image to speak
the living word of God into the lives of the covenant people.

We pray that these months will be fruitful for you as you study God's word.
You are in good company.

Rachel   *Olivia*

The prayer of BRF Ministries

Faithful God,
thank you for growing BRF Ministries
from small beginnings
into the worldwide family it is today.
We rejoice as young and old
discover you through your word
and grow daily in faith and love.
Keep us humble in your service,
ambitious for your glory
and open to new opportunities.
For your name's sake.
Amen.

Helping to pay it forward

As part of our Living Faith ministry, we're raising funds to give away copies of Bible reading notes and other resources to those who aren't able to access them any other way, working with food banks and chaplaincy services, in prisons, hospitals and care homes.

'This very generous gift will be hugely appreciated, and truly bless each recipient… Bless you for your kindness.'

'We would like to send our enormous thanks to all involved. Your generosity will have a significant impact and will help us to continue to provide support to local people in crisis, and for this we cannot thank you enough.'

If you've enjoyed and benefited from our resources, would you consider paying it forward to enable others to do so too?

Make a gift at **brf.org.uk/donate**

Psalm 139 and artificial intelligence

Charmaine Mhlanga

Rather than mastering and controlling technology, is technology mastering and controlling humanity? Has the world submitted herself to the intrusion of artificial intelligence (AI)-powered systems? What are the implications of this intrusion? Is the desire for artificial intelligence outweighing our desire for divine intelligence?

Technology continues to advance exponentially. Human-developed technological innovations are creating tools, systems, structures and opportunities that have both blessed and benefitted society. Digital technologies are not only influencing the way we live, but they are also immensely changing lives in ways that have not been fully anticipated or knowingly subscribed to. AI is being used in various sectors including healthcare, education and in everyday technologies, for example smart phones, digital assistants such as ChatGPT and other AI chatbots.

While AI has brought significant advancements, there is a negative side to it. The UN environmental programme explains that AI produces waste, including using a lot of water, minerals and other rare elements (often sourced unsustainably). We clearly cannot ignore this impact to our environment.

How can Jesus' modern-day disciples intentionally engage and be in dialogue with the ubiquitous discipline of AI, as a prerequisite to transforming the digital world? How do we advocate for ethical and just AI tools, systems and structures? Psalm 139 not only offers us an opportunity to reflect biblically on the use of AI, but it also enables us to develop a distinctive godly framework that can contribute to the redeeming and transforming of AI.

We are the recipients of God's goodness through God's gift of creation, and God enables us to create as well. We are called not to be influenced by the culture of this world, rather to look into the mirror of God's word. In doing this, we evidence and witness that only God can fix what is broken in the digital world. God seeks to work with us, to transform us by his word, so that we and the world that we live in are not defined by the algorithms of AI.

Unless otherwise stated, Bible quotations are taken from the NRSV.

1 God's omniscience, omnificence, omnipotence and omnipresence

Psalm 139

Psalm 139 is an exuberant declaration of the incommunicable and communicable attributes of God's omniscience, omnificence, omnipotence and omnipresence. Words used to describe God, though limited in themselves, help to elucidate some of God's characteristics, and those who truly seek to know God should be deeply humbled in the process, realising that we will always have more to learn. The world, meanwhile, is increasingly relying on AI-powered systems like ChatGPT, Alexa, Siri, Bixby, Google Assistant, AliGenie and many others. Is this technology shifting our attention, our priorities and our desires away from seeking and drawing near to God?

God has intimate knowledge of his people, having created them in his own image. God invites us to be relational beings together with him. Verses 3–4 remind us that there is nothing we can do without God's knowledge: our sitting down, our rising up, our thoughts, even our words are known to God even before they are uttered. Rabbi Shlomo Yitchaki, commonly known by the Rabbinic acronym Rashi, comments in verse 2 that God understands from afar how to attract us to his friendship and to his love in connected communion. However, so often we are disconnected and disengaged from a loving God and more connected and attached to our technological devices.

Isaiah 55:8 records: 'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.' God's thoughts are not the same as ours; we are limited and finite beings who cannot fully comprehend an infinite God. God's ways are distinctive, different and superior, yet God invites us to adopt his way, doing what is good, right and just. Humans appear to have an inability to understand their own limitations as set against God's limitlessness. Therefore, the psalmist asks God to search him and know his heart, testing him, examining intimately his thoughts to see whether there is a way of vexation and deterioration in him (vv. 23–24).

2 The concept of morality/amorality

In verses 1–6, the theme of God's omniscience is revealed, with the psalmist acknowledging the all-knowing power and ability of God, which far outweighs human understanding. With this acknowledgement, there are moral implications to consider for those who follow God. In a world that is increasingly devaluing humans by choosing to further develop AI-powered systems, which in many contexts are able to perform tasks better and more efficiently than humans, what biblical moral frameworks should guide the use of AI-powered systems in an era of ubiquitous AI?

Questions are constantly arising on whether AI-powered systems are amoral. At present, there is no evidence to demonstrate the presence of a consciousness or emotional awareness or that AI-powered systems can make ethical considerations. Therefore there are significant risks associated with the use of AI. AI systems operate on algorithms and patterns in data, following instructions given and objectives set by their human creators.

AI-powered systems are only capable of contributing to the persecution of humans when the humans who create AI persecute others. Threats and challenges exist due to the misuse of AI, and over-reliance on it. The issue of moral ethics in AI-powered systems arises from who and how it is designed, developed and used. To address the moral and ethical dimensions of AI, it is paramount for Christians, developers, policymakers and society to work together. This joint working needs to consider principles, processes, accountability, transparency and potential consequences of AI usage.

Considerations with regards to accountability need to be explored when things go wrong. Verse 1 communicates God's omniscience, demonstrating his complete knowledge of every aspect of our lives. With regards to human accountability, verse 1 serves as a reminder that we cannot hide our actions, thoughts or intentions from God. True accountability comes from understanding that God is aware of our inner and outer lives, prompting us to align ourselves with His will. Therefore, how do we ensure that we take responsibility for technology when and if something goes wrong? Is it possible that, as we work with AI-powered systems, we have abdicated some of their moral responsibility to systems that are being configured by our own biased engineering? Therefore, what moral responsibilities do societies have to those affected by technological change?

3 So, if God is originator – what then for creativity and technology?

Psalm 139 affirms God's knowledge of life from the pre-embryonic stage in the concealment of the womb right through to death. The intricate blueprint of humanity's DNA is created, formed and fashioned by God, who equips everyone with a unique design. The God who formed our inward parts and knits us together in the womb knows the gestation period with great intimacy. This idea of God's knowledge sparks fear, awe, wonder and praise.

The same God also tells us how to build an ark, create and decorate the tabernacle and temple, fight battles and destroy Jericho's walls. How does God train his people in terms of technology and artificial intelligence?

Humanity creates things with components that fail and become obsolete with time, requiring repair or replacement. In contrast, God creates with precision and completeness, within an intentionality of creating good.

Given that God created and designed humanity in his image as something good, should we fear or dread the reality of our sinfulness, which causes a disconnection from God as we attempt to create in ways that go against his original design? What is our response to God, who knows our intricate form, in comparison to our response to human-created technologies that seek to mimic the abilities that have been created by God?

There is, however, a hopeful side to the use of AI-powered systems and technologies: they can improve efficiency, reduce human error, enable access to faster problem-solving in the field of health and provide enhanced security against cyber-crime. This could be called technophilia or techno-optimism. But with such promises of efficiency, are we to some extent quickly drifting into dependence on technology out of necessity or laziness?

In contrast, technophobia is experienced by people who are increasingly becoming overwhelmed by the fast pace of technological advancements and are struggling to keep up with the changes. It has been evident that some people have experienced or encountered the negative side of technology, resulting in this fear.

With increased concerns around privacy, security and the negative impact of technology on society including personal relationships, how can we mitigate against further incidents contributing to technophobia through the misuse and abuse of technology?

4 Who is watching you?

Verse 7 reminds us that there is no place we can escape or hide from God's presence. God transcends time and space, and does not have any physical boundaries that can be a hindrance. Some people find this comforting, while others may experience it as overwhelming or even intrusive. God knows all about the humans he has created, yet there is no coercive power and control. God chooses not to violate our freedoms; on the contrary, God is attentive to the things he has made, including humans.

We are living in a world of increased external and internal surveillance. Our personal and sensitive data is being collected with our consent, but also without it. In our use of social media platforms, we may be sharing our date of birth, holiday arrangements, personal photographs, current employer or even motion images from our doorbell camera, taken at our private residence. Arguably, some of the sensitive data we are sharing on social media we would not share with governments, even if requested to do so.

The misuse of AI-powered systems is evident. AI-powered systems are playing a significant role in enhancing digital surveillance systems. These systems are being used, for example, in facial recognition to monitor citizens without their consent and in some aspects for the purpose of control and intimidation. They may identify individuals in crowds, tracing movement, and have given rise to concerns around human rights, privacy and security. A crucial analysis is required to explore what implications are present in God 'watching us' and 'knowing us intimately', as opposed to humans doing the same. Can humans be as attentive and compassionate as God, who sees all things and knows all things? Yet he is forgiving and long-suffering (Numbers 14:18).

Genesis 16:13 recognises that God sees the ill-treatment of others and concerns himself with the needs of the persecuted. How are we to respond when we see the violation and dehumanisation of others through social media platforms, smart dashboard cameras and intelligent CCTV systems?

6–12 October

5 The role of governments in AI ethics and governance

Genesis 1:31 informs us that 'God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good'. God demonstrated precision that is unfathomable and unequalled in bringing forth creation. Humans have not mastered the ability to replicate to these unparalleled standards of God. With AI-powered systems progressing exponentially, advancing with new developments and innovations, the power race in competing for AI dominance is intensive. Yet worldwide governments, including UK legislation, have been unable to keep up.

Not all humans have an intrinsic drive for power and control, yet some individuals and governments desire to have power and control over the body and mind, for purposes that are both beneficial and potentially disastrous. Humanity's fallen nature means that it is a flawed approach to believe we can improve on God's original creative design. This nature in humans is resulting in some governments introducing draconian policies and legislation that continue to threaten human dignity and existence, through the misuse of AI-powered systems.

The term 'Dark Web' may be familiar to you. This 'Dark Web' is designed to maintain users' and website operators' anonymity. This is achieved through layered encryption systems designed to conceal users' IP (Internet Protocol) addresses, encrypting digital traffic and making it difficult to trace. Words like 'dark' or 'darkness' conjure up feelings of fear, danger, dread, uncertainty, ignorance, lack of knowledge, 'living in the dark', yet in verse 12, no darkness, let alone the 'Dark Web', can be obscured from God who evidences no differentiation between darkness and light. Both are the same to God – as we have seen already, there is no reason to fear.

Globally, there is no single organisation, entity or government that has complete oversight or total control of AI-powered systems, including the dark web. AI-powered systems are being developed by a wide range of organisations, institutions, companies and individuals to be used for various purposes in different fields, providing innovations for positive change and equally potentially dangerous and disastrous outcomes. In considering these, how can Christians shape the way we think, engage and interact with AI?

6 Creating awareness

Without a knowledgeable, compassionate and loving challenge, the impact of AI-powered systems on freedom, privacy, consent and security could have further detrimental effects on people. Are Jesus' modern-day disciples working as agents of light to transform a world of technology that appears to be making people's lives less meaningful?

In verses 19–22, the psalmist introduces the subject of 'the wicked', who in themselves are not a threat to the psalmist but rather are enemies of God and give false witness about God. The psalmist aligns himself with God, standing with God, who is on the side of all that is good, true and trustworthy. God teaches and gives us hints of himself through divine inspiration reflected in Psalm 139. God's desire has always been to give us beauty in creation, to bless us through it and not to harm us by his creation. Yet we, those created in his image, are creating technologies that have the potential to harm others.

Without robust safeguards, society continues to be vulnerable to the risk of harm and abuse by the 'wicked' who are misusing AI. This has been evidenced through biased and discriminatory development of algorithms that perpetuate and amplify existing prejudices. These intentionally seek to disproportionately target specific and, in some aspects, already vulnerable and at-risk groups of people, by denying them access. Not only this, but AI systems can also inadvertently produce or recommend violent or harmful content due to bias in the data the system was trained in or other errors in data processing.

There are those developing and using AI to bless and benefit societies, yet there is an urgent reality that there are also those with 'wicked' intentions. These also control and influence systems, exacerbating inequality, discrimination and the devaluing of humans. How are Jesus' disciples to align with God in matters pertaining to the development, distribution and use of AI-powered systems?

In Matthew 5:13–15, Jesus calls his disciples 'salt of the earth' and 'light of the world'. Jesus has the expectation that his disciples' light will be positioned at the highest place in the city, so that their light shines for everyone. If Jesus' disciples are to be light in some of the dark spaces of AI-powered systems, are we ready, willing and able to robustly appraise it?

Guidelines

Regrettably, it can be argued that some people are apathetic to AI, yet it is too important an issue to ignore. Reliable, factual and credible information from trusted sources and voices is required to enable spiritual discernment guided by the indwelling Divine Intelligence, the Holy Spirit, who teaches us all things.

- Technology, like the languages we create and use, often expresses and shapes our worldview, our culture and our values. If technology has a way of magnifying human abilities and exposing frailties, how can it be used to bring about ethical and just AI in society?
- How can learning to use digital technology effectively be another opportunity that is not missed in creating spaces where people share and rejoice in the message of the gospel?
- When our appraisal and understanding of technology is limited, is it possible that our worldview, culture and values are deficient? How do we address these limitations and deficiencies?
- Can Christians develop a healthy perspective between technophobia and technophilia in relation to using digital technology?

FURTHER READING

Susan Brokensha, Eduan Kotze, Burgert A. Senekal, *AI in and for Africa: A humanistic perspective* (Routledge, 2025).

Joy Buolamwini, *Unmasking AI: My mission to protect what is human in a world of machines* (Random House, 2023).

Yuval Noah Harari, *21 Lessons for the 21st Century* (Jonathan Cape, 2018).

John Lennox, *2084: Artificial intelligence and the future of humanity* (Zondervan, 2020).

Joshua Searle, *Theology After Christendom: Forming prophets for a post-Christian world* (Wipf and Stock, 2018).

Faraday Institute for Science and Religion, **faraday.cam.ac.uk**

A unique Bible reading resource offering in-depth study notes written by a diverse contributor team, *Guidelines* is the perfect tool to help you interpret and apply the biblical text confidently in your context. Each issue covers four months and is structured in weekly units, broken into six sections, with an introduction giving context and a final application section.

'I find **Guidelines** so helpful, full of insight and depth. The challenges are also helpful, and looking outside the box of a particular stance is so refreshing.'

'Our thanks for making us think things through.'

'I feel I must write to say how much help, support and encouragement we have felt from the recent contributors. Many thanks to all concerned.'

Commissioned and edited by BRF Ministries Content Creation Team Lead **Rachel Tranter** and former Living Faith Ministry Lead **Olivia Warburton**.

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