

Summer in the Psalms: Psalm 139
ABC 9/5/21

Ps 139 is one of the most loved psalms, & for good reasons. But if we're honest, it's also one of the most hated psalms, also for good reasons. Why? Because it tells us about our God. He is all-knowing, He is all-present, He is all-powerful, & He is our Creator. & then it tells us how we must respond to Him. In our sinfulness, we don't like that we can't hide from Him. But when we're in Christ, we find it a comfort. This psalm has 4 stanzas each of 6 vss. In each one the psalmist is answering a question he's asking of himself. It is strongly theological, dealing with doctrines such as God's omniscience, omnipresence, & omnipotence; but it's also wonderfully personal, because it speaks of these attributes of God in ways that impact us personally. It has 2 practical aims that become clear towards the end. 1st, the writer wants to separate himself from all who deliberately practice evil. 2nd, he wants God to search him thoroughly & purge him of anything that's offensive to God so he might walk in the way everlasting.

1. How Well Does God Know Me? He is All-Knowing In the 1st 6 vss David answers the question of how well does God know us? He comes to the conclusion that God is all-knowing about everything about him. God knows him better than he knows himself. AW Pink wrote,

God ... knows everything; everything possible, everything actual; all events, all creatures, of the past, the present, & the future. He is perfectly acquainted with every detail in the life of every being in heaven, in earth, & in hell.... Nothing escapes His notice, nothing can be hidden from Him, nothing is forgotten by Him.... He never errs, never changes, never overlooks anything.¹

AW Tozer expands this description by adding negatives.

God has never learned from anyone. God cannot learn. Could God at any time or in any manner receive into His mind knowledge that He did not possess & had not possessed from eternity? ... To think of a God who must sit at the feet of a teacher ... is to think of someone other than the Most High God, maker of heaven & earth....

Because God knows all things perfectly, He knows no thing better than any other thing, but all things equally well. He never discovers anything, He is never surprised, never amazed. He never wonders about anything nor ... does He seek information or ask questions.²

This knowledge is what the psalmist is writing about in the opening vss. **1-4**

¹ Arthur W. Pink, *Gleanings in the Godhead*, p 19

² A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy: The Attributes of God, Their Meaning in the Christian Life*, pp 61–62

The 1st line states the principle, **O LORD, You have searched me & known me.** **Search** means to examine with pain & care. It was used to describe digging deep into a mine, exploring a land, & investigating a legal case.³ In other words, nothing about us is hidden from God's sight, everything is laid bare. Our friends see the outside but God sees the heart & we can't deceive Him. Adam & Eve tried it (Gen 3:7–24), Cain tried it (Gen 4:1–15), David tried it (2 Sam 11–12), & Jonah tried it, & all of them discovered that God knew all about them. God intimately knows us. We don't have this kind of knowledge. I know you & you know me, but our knowledge of each other is superficial. I can observe your actions & listen to your words but your thoughts are hidden from me & mine are hidden from you. You can be married for years & still discover new things about your mate. Even the closest human relationships fall short of total knowledge. In fact, we don't even have a clear understanding of our own mind & heart (Jer 17:9). Sin blinds us so we don't even see ourselves clearly. But God's knowledge of us is perfect. He sees our every action & hears our every word. More than this, He knows & reads our thoughts perfectly. God sees us with perfect clarity, for **there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open & laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do** (Heb 4:13). As we consider this we begin to feel like David felt: surrounded, trapped, & vulnerable before God. This is what he confesses in **vs 5**.

The word translated **enclosed** is often translated as *besieged* in the OT. David knew what it was to besiege a city, but here he confesses that God has **enclosed** or besieged him. God has surrounded him & trapped him. He's recognizing his absolute vulnerability before the God who sees & knows all things. What are we to do with such a God? An all-knowing God is immensely threatening, which is why we try to live as if there is no God. The thought of God's omniscience *fills us with uneasiness*.⁴ Tozer puts it this way:

*In the divine omniscience we see set forth against each other the terror & fascination of the Godhead. That God knows each person through & through can be a cause of shaking fear to the man that has something to hide—some unforsaken sin, some secret crime committed against man or God.*⁵

³ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Exultant*, 1st ed., "Be" Commentary Series, p 196

⁴ AW Pink, *The Attributes of God*, p 13

⁵ Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, 63

The thought of *Big Brother* in George Orwell's novel *1984*, the thought of our phones & electronics tracking us, frightens us. But God knows us even better. In vs 6 David confesses the thought of it is overwhelming to him: **6**

God's knowledge is beyond our comprehension & we're unable to fathom it. Paul confesses something like this in Rom 11:33 when he exclaims, **Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom & knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments & unfathomable His ways!** I hope we all feel this way when we contemplate the knowledge of God. How does it make you feel to think that God is all-seeing & all-knowing? There's a sense in which it should comfort us in that He knows all things & us perfectly. He even sees our thoughts & knows our motives. It's because we're sinful that God's omniscience isn't always a comfort. It makes us feel vulnerable & exposed before Him. It makes us feel like running away. That's what Adam & Eve did after they rebelled against God. They tried to hide from Him & to cover their shame, but they couldn't.

2. How Near is God to Me? He is Ever-Present In vss 7-12 we learn David felt the same impulse to run. While his 1st response is awe & wonder (6), his next response seems to be flight (7). It's as if he wants to run away from the intimacy that God wants with him. He asks, **Where can I go from Your Spirit?** (7). The answer is *Nowhere* (Rom 8:38–39). Again, he asks: **Or where can I flee from Your presence, literally, your face?** Again, the answer is, *Nowhere*.⁶ If God knows so much about us, it seems the wisest thing is to run away & hide but that is impossible. It's a natural reaction to want to escape God's all-seeing, all-knowing presence. That's probably why David's thoughts turned in vss 7–12 to God's omnipresence. He's still thinking of God's omniscience, realizing that the reason God sees & knows everything is that He is everywhere to see & know it. In other words, *LORD, when I consider that You see everything about me, even my thoughts, I feel like running from You! But where can I go? Because You aren't only all-knowing, You're also present everywhere.* Do you realize there's nowhere that God is not? David imagines 3 areas in which escape from God might be thought to be possible, but he dismisses each one. **8**

⁶ Donald Williams & Lloyd J. Ogilvie, *Psalms 73–150*, vol. 14, The Preacher's Commentary Series, p 472

A. Up or Down Our 1st thought may be to climb higher than God so God can't reach us or to descend so low we'll be beneath His grasp. But the highest point to which we can rise is **heaven** & God is there. The lowest point to which we can descend is **Sheol** & God is there too, in his judicial aspect. In fact, the thing that makes hell so terrible is that's run by God. It isn't ruled by the devil in spite of popular opinions. **Sheol** is the place where the dead live. Before Jesus' resurrection, the bodies of those who died went to the grave & their souls to Sheol. This was true of both the righteous & the unrighteous, but their experiences there were very different. The unrighteous, who died in their sins, were tormented. The righteous, who were justified through faith in the promised Messiah, were comforted. Now that Christ has risen from the dead, things are different. Today, when those who have Christ's righteousness credited to them because of their faith in Him, when they die, their souls don't go to Sheol but into the very presence of God (2 Cor 5:8). Jesus has won the victory for them. Now, it's only the unrighteous dead who are alive in Sheol. The righteous dead live in the presence of God while their bodies await the resurrection. Many people assume God isn't present in Sheol or hell, but I don't think that's true. There's nowhere that God is not. He is omnipresent. The difference between heaven & hell isn't God's presence or absence, but the way that God is present. Sometimes you'll hear that hell is simply the absence of God & not true punishment. That isn't so. In heaven, God is present to eternally bless His children & to lavish them with His love & grace. Not so in hell. There God is eternally present to pour out His wrath & justice upon sin. In hell, the wicked will be tormented not by the absence of God, but by His presence. You've heard it said (& I've probably been guilty of saying it), that God can't dwell in the presence of sin. If you think of it, that's a silly statement. God is everywhere present in this world, isn't He? & yet this world is filled with sin. When Adam & Eve sinned, God approached them in the garden. It would be more accurate to say that God must punish all sin, because He is holy & just. This is true & God will punish every sin. He's either punished your sin by setting it on Jesus as your substitute or He'll punish it at the final judgment & in hell throughout eternity.

B. East or West If it's impossible to escape God by going up or down, perhaps it can be done by going east or west. **9-10**

Dawn rises in the east, & from David's perspective in Israel, the far side of the sea was west. **The wings of the dawn** is a beautifully poetic expression. If you've stood & watched the sun rise you've seen how the rays of the rising sun shoot across the heavens with the speed of light & reach to the farthest reaches of the horizon. This is what he's describing. From East to West, from horizon to horizon. God is already there before us.

C. Darkness or Light 11-12

People pursue evil in the dark, thinking it will hide them. But David confesses the darkness of night won't do the trick either. Darkness may hide our sins from others, but it can't hide us from the eyes of nor from the presence of God. Even the darkness is light to God.

Do you see what David's doing? He's looking for somewhere to run, but He confesses there's nowhere in all of creation for him to go. God is present in heaven (above the earth), in Sheol (under the earth), to the East & to the West, in light & in darkness He is there. David is out of options. He's truly hemmed in on every side. & the same is true for you & me. We may try to escape the presence of God by running to some place or by denying His existence, but it's all in vain, because He does exist & He is everywhere present.

3. How Did I Come to Be? God is All-Powerful In vss 13-18 David goes even deeper in his contemplation of God's omniscience, because the only reason he reflects on God's omnipresence is to explain why it is that God knows everything: God sees & knows everything because God is everywhere. Now we see his discussion of omnipotence is also linked to omniscience because, according to David, a further reason God knows everything is because He's made everything & controls everything. John Stott expressed this connection when he wrote, *God can search man out not only because He sees him, but because He made him.*⁷ David here clarifies that God isn't merely present in the realms of heaven & hell, earth & sea, day & night in a passive way, but He's present actively as Creator & Sustainer of all life. **For from Him & through Him & to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen (Rom 11:36). 13-16**

⁷ John R. W. Stott, *Favorite Psalms*, p 120

When David says, **you formed my inward parts**, it could refer to the soul of man, the invisible parts, the mind, will, & personality. Do you realize there was a time when you were not? & this is true of both our body & soul. God is the Source of both. When David says, **you wove me in my mother's womb**, he refers to the development of the human body which contains the soul. **Formed** means woven together (Is 32:12), & **skillfully wrought** in vs 15 is translated *embroidered* in Exodus. **The depths of the earth** is a poetic way of speaking of the darkness & secrecy of the womb. It is there that the Lord weaves & embroiders humans. But He doesn't just create them & turn them loose. He sovereignly sustains them. Have you ever stopped to think how much of your life is dependent upon forces at work in you? If any of them stopped, you'd die. You're dependent on something you have no control over. Your heart is thumping away right now. It would be awful if we had to control it with our mind or will. How would you like to have to keep saying to yourself continuously, *Now thump. Now thump. Now thump.* Or if you had to say to your lungs, *Breathe in, breathe out; Breathe in, breathe out.* Someone else is sustaining us which is obvious from the design of our bodies. In vs 14 we see that David's response to these truths is to praise God. In vs 16 we learn that God isn't only the source of our body & soul, He's also the source of the days of our life. This probably includes the length of life (Job 14:5) & the tasks He wants us to perform (Eph 2:10; Phil 2:12-13). This isn't some form of fatalism because what we are & what He plans for us come from His loving heart (33:11) & are the very best He has for us (Rom 12:2). Even the days of our lives are determined by God. Men write books about what they learn. They write history books, but always after the events have occurred. Not so with God. He wrote the days of our life **when as yet there was not one of them**. God is the source of the days of our life. He formed them. He wrote His book concerning us beforehand. This was true of David & it's true of us. Notice David's response to this isn't to complain against God, but to marvel at His wisdom & grace: **17-18**

When David says, **When I awake, I am still with You**, he may be referring to the fact that each morning the thoughts of God's knowledge, presence, & power are with him, so he can't escape the overwhelming fact of God in relation to himself. Or he may be referring poetically to God's presence after death, in the resurrection. In that case, David would be referring to God's hand on his life

from before conception through eternity, which is certainly true. Waking or sleeping David is always with God, since God is everywhere. He is our Creator & Sustainer. He knit us together, body & soul. He formed our days. He thinks of us continually & sustains us. Day after day we awake & God is with us. Indeed, He'll be with us & sustain us for all eternity.

It's not just that God knows everything, He knows me. It's not just that God is everywhere, He is everywhere with me. It's not just that God created everything, He created me. The last stanza seems to take an abrupt turn & is often overlooked.

4. What Then Shall I Do? God's Holiness (19-24) The question that remains is, *What shall I do? How must I respond?* If God sees our sinful words & deeds, even the thoughts & intentions of our heart. & if we can't flee from His presence, because He's everywhere, & if He's our Creator & Sustainer, *what then shall we do?* Vss 19-24 show us. 1st, we must turn from sin. That's what's described in vss 19-22 where David expresses his hatred for all that is evil. **19-22**

Does the thought of **utmost hatred** strike you as odd? Does it seem like a vice rather than a virtue? We often wrongly think that Christians shouldn't hate anything. But to fear God is to hate evil (Prov 8:13). We can't love God properly & be complacent about sin. The reason for David's moral indignation is that these evil people **speak against** God **wickedly** & **take His name in vain** (20). David's concern is for God's honor. His commitment is clear; he hates those who hate God & loathes those who rebel against Him. Since they've rejected God, David rejects them.⁸ This might trouble us because Jesus teaches us to love our enemies (Mt 5:44). But there's no reason to be troubled by what's said here. To hate the wicked & to love your enemies aren't contradictory. It's possible, on one hand, to hate the wicked & their works, & on the other, to pray for their repentance & show them kindness & love. It's possible for us to do these 2 things at once. Yes, it's difficult to love rebellious sinners & still hate their sins, but we need more holy hatred of sin. Whenever we pray, **Thy kingdom come** (Mt 6:10), we're asking the Lord to judge the wicked, & then we leave the matter in His hands. Jude 22-23 reflects the fine line between loving sinners but hating their sin: **have mercy on some, who are doubting; save others, snatching them out of the fire; & on some have**

⁸ Donald Williams & Lloyd J. Ogilvie, *Psalms 73-150*, vol. 14, The Preacher's Commentary Series, p 475

mercy with fear, hating even the garment polluted by the flesh. Holiness means living apart from the wicked & staying undefiled from their sin, but reaching out to them with the gospel of salvation. After considering God's knowledge, presence, & power, David's choosing not to flee from God, but to run to Him & be found on His side. He prays for God's justice. He separates himself from the wicked. He declares God's enemies are his enemies. We must do the same thing. In Ps 1 we learned there are 2 possible paths. There's the way of the wicked & the way of the righteous. There's no other way. So don't be found walking, standing, nor sitting with the wicked. No, be found on the path of the righteous which leads to eternal life. Flee from sin & run to God. Draw near to Him & be found on His side. Hating the wicked in this way doesn't mean you can't pray for them & show them love & kindness. That's what Jesus meant when He said, **love your enemies**. He means, do good to them. Listen carefully to His words,

If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners in order to receive back the same amount. But love your enemies, & do good, & lend, expecting nothing in return; & your reward will be great, & you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful & evil men. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful (Lk 6:32–36).

The Father hates the wicked & yet He's merciful & kind to them. We're to do the same. We're to **abhor what is evil; cling to what is good** (Rom 12:9). & yes, we're to, at the same time, show love & kindness to our enemies. After considering God as He truly is, David didn't run from God, but ran to Him. He turned away from the wicked, took God's side, & declared that God's enemies were his enemies. David pursued righteousness & the way of life eternal, & we must do the same. He concludes, **23-24**

David opened his soul before God, asking if there were any unknown or overlooked sins. This showed he desired holiness in his life & how humble he was in recognizing he needed God's help in knowing himself. When prayed sincerely, this is something of a dangerous prayer, worthy but dangerous. *It's a serious thing to pray, because it invites painful exposures & surgery, if we truly mean it. Still it is what every wise believer should desire.*⁹ David prays for 4 things: for God to know

⁹ James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms 107–150*, p 1212

him & expose his heart; for God to try, or perfect, his thoughts; for God to purge whatever evil remains in him; & for God to lead him in the everlasting way. In inviting God to become intimate with him, he's responding to the reality that God has already searched him & known him (1). When we submit to God's work in our lives, we grant Him permission to do that which He's already purposed. This prayer isn't a self-righteous boast, but a cry to God for grace & cleansing. Some read this & think David is claiming to be perfectly pure before God. *Go ahead, look at my heart & mind with Your X-ray vision & see what you can find! You'll find me blameless!* Is that what David means? No, if David thought he was self-righteous, why did he consider running from God's presence earlier? We know David wasn't upright in & of himself. In Ps 51:3 he said, **For I know my transgressions, & my sin is ever before me.** If you know the story of David, you know he was a flawed & sinful man, no different than we are. He humbly asks God to search him. Isn't it interesting that a psalm beginning with a declaration that God knows all things should end with a request for God to search & know David? He wants God to use the knowledge God has of him to lead him in the **everlasting way**. Here he doesn't address God as *Yahweh*, the Lord of the Covenant; he calls him *EI*, the Mighty God, the King & Creator of all things. He doesn't waste time in repeating to God what God has revealed to him about his sinfulness. Rather he goes straight to the point, & asks God for pardon. He knows he may do so since God has pardoned him already.¹⁰

What is the way to life everlasting? Ps 2 mirrors vss 19-24 here. It speaks of how the Son will judge the nations at the end of time & concludes with these words:

Worship the LORD with reverence & rejoice with trembling. Do homage to the Son, that He not become angry, & you perish in the way, For His wrath may soon be kindled. How blessed are all who take refuge in Him! (Ps 2:11-12).

Because God is who He is, all-knowing, ever-present, all-powerful, the sinner can find no refuge on earth from the just wrath of God, apart from one exception. Refuge can be found in God's Son, & it is Him, the Messiah, Jesus Christ, that David fled for refuge. We must do the same. How should the knowledge of God's omniscience, omnipresence, & omnipotence impact us?

¹⁰ George Angus Fulton Knight, *Psalms*, vol. 2, The Daily Study Bible Series, pp 326-327

A. It should humble us. Remember Job? Job didn't know what God was doing. His friends argued that since God is a just God & this is a moral universe bad things don't happen without good reasons. Therefore, Job must have sinned in some way & brought his troubles on himself. Job didn't consider himself to be innocent of sin, but he knew he'd done nothing to deserve what was happening to him. Who can explain it? For 37 chpts God is silent. At last, at the end of the book, God speaks. We might expect Him to explain things to Job, to tell him about Satan's accusations & reveal how Job had been singled out as a righteous man who would trust God through everything. That's not what we find. Instead, we find God rebuking Job for presuming to think he could understand God's ways, even if they were explained to him. This is in the form of a lengthy interrogation having to do with God's perfect knowledge contrasted with Job's ignorance. It goes on for 4 chapters. At the end, Job is completely humbled. He replies to God, **I have declared that which I did not understand, Things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.... Therefore I retract, & I repent in dust & ashes** (Job 42:3, 6). When we begin to appreciate the perfect knowledge of God & own very limited understanding, it will humble us.

B. It should comfort us. God knows the worst about us & loves us anyway. He wants the best for us & He works with us to see that happen. If God is for us, who can be against us? (Rom 8:31). Job expressed his comfort in God's knowledge, saying, **He knows the way that I take; when He has tried me, I shall come forth as gold** (Job 23:10).

C. It should encourage us to live for God. David reflects on the omniscience of God & it leads him to ask God to help him lead an upright life. We know very little. We don't even know ourselves. But God knows us. He knows our weaknesses & our strengths. He knows our sins but also our desires for a godly life. He knows when we need rebuking & correcting but also when we need teaching & encouragement. If anyone can **lead me in the everlasting way**, it is God. Likewise, since I know He knows me & wants to help me, I can be encouraged to get on with righteous living.

D. It should help us to pray. In the SOTM Jesus encourages us to pray confidently, expecting answers. **When you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. So do not be like them; for your Father knows**

what you need before you ask Him (Mt 6:7–8). God’s knowledge of what we need is so perfect that He often answers even before we ask. **It will also come to pass that before they call, I will answer; & while they are still speaking, I will hear,** wrote Isaiah (65:24). Who can be terrified by a God who knows & answers us like that?¹¹

So what about you? Have you taken refuge in the Son? If not, I pray you would. I pray you’d come to your senses regarding your sin. I pray you’d feel hemmed in on every side by the God who is all-seeing, everywhere present, all-powerful, holy, & just. I pray that you’d come to the realization that there’s nowhere to run except to the Son, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, the Savior, the Door, the way, the truth, & the life, the only Mediator between God & man. If we hope to be found on God’s side & to have everlasting life, we must be found in Him. So turn from your sins & to Christ for His righteousness.

If you have faith in Christ, I pray you would, like David, marvel at the grace that God has shown to you, & say with him, **17-18**

& then pray with him, **23-24**

PRAY Communion

The amazing thing is that this God who knows us so thoroughly, who knows every awful thought we ever have, desires to have a relationship with us. Because of our sin & God’s holiness, something had to be done to remove that barrier to our relationship with Him. With Adam & Eve, God performed an object lesson that pointed ahead to His ultimate solution. Their fig leaves weren’t adequate. God slaughtered an animal & clothed them with its skin, showing them they couldn’t be restored to fellowship with a holy God without the shedding of blood. Although the Bible doesn’t specify, I believe God slaughtered a lamb & explained to Adam & Eve their future Descendant, the coming Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world. Can you imagine their shock at seeing death for the 1st time as they watched the blood spurt & the animal writhe as its life-blood drained from it? It showed them in a graphic way that God takes sin seriously. It must be paid for through death. But it also showed them that in His grace, God would provide the

¹¹ James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms 107–150: An Expository Commentary*, pp 1212–1213

substitute so that no sinner need be separated from God or pay the penalty for their own sin. Christianity isn't following a set of rules or going through a bunch of religious rituals. It's a personal relationship with the living God who knows you thoroughly. You enter that relationship when you put your trust in the Substitute He provided, the Lord Jesus Christ, who paid the penalty for your sin with His death on the cross. That's what we remember as we come to communion.

For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, "This is My body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me" (1 Cor 11:23-24).

We remember our Substitute, Jesus, taking our place, bearing the punishment of our sins upon Himself, & dying for us.

In the same way *He took* the cup also after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink *it*, in remembrance of Me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes (1 Cor 11:25-26).

As we take the cup, we remember our Substitute, Jesus, taking our place, receiving God's wrath for our sins, shedding His blood, & dying for us.