

The Searching God Knows All

An Exposition of Psalm 139

Many consider Psalm 139 one of the most beautiful of all the Psalms in the entire Bible. The 139th Psalm is a soul-searching Psalm, and it is a tribute to the *omniscience* and the *omnipotence* of God.

Omniscience describes God as all-knowing, and omnipotence describes God as all-powerful. The reference is to the true and living God—the God who reveals Himself in the Scriptures.

In some of the earlier psalms, the writer (most often David) exalts the love, mercy, and kindness of God, which shall endure forever. In Psalm 139, he reminds us that we must not make the love and mercy of God an excuse for careless and sinful living. There are four major sections in Psalm 139, each six verses in length.

1. God's Knowledge Includes All Things (139:1-6)

God knows us intimately. David sensed that God knew him through and through. Nothing escapes the all-seeing eye of God. He notices even when a sparrow falls. God knows everything that ever happened, everything that is now taking place, and everything that will ever happen in the future. God knows everything there is to know about each human being.

This is distressing to those who live in unbelief and sin. It can cause shaking fear in the hearts of those who have something to hide, and to those who are continuing in some secret sin committed against God or man. But the fact that God knows everything is comforting to those whose hearts are right toward Him, and who know that God loves all mankind.

God knows our actions (verses 2-3). Our downsitting speaks of times of quiet rest. Our uprising speaks of our going forth to work. God observes our most casual acts. He notices when I sit down and when I get up again. He knows when I cannot sleep, and when I get up in the middle of the night. He knows when I leave the house, when I drive the car, and when I ride on the train or bus. He knows when I return home, and sees when I walk back in the door. He sees every movement, and He is interested in my welfare.

God sees you making breakfast, getting the children off to school, cleaning the house, and shoveling the snow. He knows exactly what's ahead for each human being. He is never taken by surprise. He is aware of our problems, our temptations, our decisions, our disappointments, our failures, and the worries that come our way.

God knows "my thought afar off" (verse 2b); that is, He knows our aims and plans for the future. He knows exactly what you are thinking right now. "Thou compasses my path and my lying down, and art acquainted with all my ways" (verse 3). He precedes and follows me. He took note of my first step as a young child more than 80 years ago, and He will notice my last faltering step as an old man just before I die.

God knows our words even before they are spoken (verse 4). He knows every word I say. He is aware of our idle words, our foolish words, our mean and spiteful words—and He loves to notice thoughtful, and kind, and encouraging words.

God knows about kings and dictators. He knows about all the battles that were fought down through the years—the wars fought by Napoleon and Hitler, and the plotting of national leaders. God knows the names of all the stars in the heavens. God knows our thoughts when we see people doing strange things, and the attitudes of our hearts when someone is unkind to us.

An overweight friend of mine one time told how another person was making fun of him. He said that he used all his four hundred pounds to flatten the mocker against the wall. God saw both acts of unkindness.

He sees what you read. He is aware of the programs you listen to, and what you watch on the TV or video monitor. He sees you in the hotel room when you're away on a business trip. He has no trouble noticing what you are observing on the websites of the Internet.

Does the knowledge that God is aware of your thoughts make you feel uneasy? Your answer to that question is an index of your spiritual condition. Most of us would feel uncomfortable if we were in the presence of someone who knew all of our secret thoughts. Yet God knows all of our actions, words, and thoughts. Those whose relationship with God is not right are distressed by that thought. But those who are sincere Christians, seeking to walk daily in the ways of God, take comfort in the fact that God knows all things.

The first six verses of Psalm 139 center on the omniscience of God. God's knowledge includes all things. There is nothing He does not know.

There was a group of school-children who were asked whether they thought God understood computers, and most of them thought that He didn't understand computers. We may not understand them, but God does! No wonder the Psalmist exclaimed, "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain unto it" (verse 6).

2. God's Presence is Everywhere (139:7-12)

God is with us constantly. God's omnipresence must be frightening to those who are trying to escape Him, but it is reassuring to those who believe in Him and fear Him. Wherever we may be, God is there to guide and to hold us. It is impossible to ever escape from God's presence.

Using the four points of the compass, David speaks of the "wings of the morning" (verse 9a), where the sun rises, referring to the east. The "uttermost parts of the sea" (verse 9b) refers to the west, the distant horizon. The phrase "thy right hand" (verse 10b) refers to the south. In ancient times, directions were often determined by facing east. If you stand so that you are looking at the rising of the sun (in the east), then your right hand is facing south.

The point of verses 9-10 is this: no matter where we look, or where we travel, God is there! I remember stepping off a plane in Manila, Philippines, on June 9, 1970—alone, but sensing the presence of God, even though I was on the opposite side of the earth from where I lived.

John Greenleaf Whittier speaks about the islands of the sea, and says in "The Eternal Goodness":

“I know not where His islands lift
Their fronded palms in air;
I only know I cannot drift
Beyond His love and care.”

Furthermore, the Lord sees even in the darkness (verse 11). Have you ever experienced the darkness of a cave when they turned out the lights? The typical reaction is to feel helpless and alone, and we are glad when the lights are turned on again. The eyes of the Lord are brighter than the sun, and His all-seeing eyes can penetrate even the darkness (verse 12). His eyes can peer into the hidden corners. The words of Hebrews 4:13 declare, “all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do.”

Verse 8 says, “If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there.” Believers in the Lord Jesus expect to meet God in Heaven. In the last chapters of the Bible we read about Heaven—the streets of gold and the walls of jasper—but best of all, we shall see God’s face (Revelation 22:4)! “If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there!” Revelation 21:3 says that in the realms of Heaven, the saved “shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.”

But sinners will meet God in Hell also (verse 8b). “If I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there.” The word “hell” (in verse 8) is the Hebrew word “sheol,” which sometimes (in the Old Testament) is translated “hell,” or “the deep,” or simply “the land of forgetfulness” (Psalm 88:12). Sheol is the Old Testament name for “the place of the departed.”

Even in Hell, it will be impossible to escape God. People in Hell will not experience communion with God, but they will recognize that it is the Lord, and not Satan, Who is in charge there! The point of the message in verses 7-12 is that there is no place in the entire universe, on land or sea, in Heaven or in Hell, where one can escape from God’s presence. The blessing of that truth is that we are never alone. Jesus says, “And lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world” (Matthew 28:20).

3. God’s Power in the Formation of Man (139:13-18)

God made us wonderfully. Some people seem to think of God as caring only for the vast concerns of the universe, and not for individual persons. But the truth found in verses 13-18 of this psalm is that God has a deep personal concern for each human being. It starts at the time of conception. This section of Psalm 139 focuses on just one aspect of God’s mighty power—His power and wisdom in the mystery of birth.

Does the birth of a little baby fascinate you? The phrase in verse 15—“I was made in secret, and curiously wrought in the lowest parts of the earth”—is a figurative description which heightens the feeling of mystery that surrounds the birth of a child. God even sees into the darkness of the womb. Before you were born, God supervised the development of each part of your body. You were woven together in the womb as a marvelous masterpiece of God’s creative power. The phrase “curiously wrought” speaks of the interlacing of bones, muscles, and nerves as we were formed inside our mother’s womb.

Each individual person is a creation of God. True, He didn’t create you and me from the ground or from a rib, as He did Adam and Eve. Although He brought us into existence through the natural processes of conception and birth, God nevertheless was in full control of our creation as a human being.

God's loving concern for us started even before we were born. God shaped us in our mother's wombs (verses 13-16), and watched over us during the fetal stage with extraordinary attention and care.

God thinks about us constantly. We are the objects of His constant care and concern. He thinks about us all the time. His thoughts about you and me are more in number than the grains of sand on all the seashores (139:17-18)!

Although these verses do not address the issue of abortion directly, they certainly are related to that issue. The unborn child is shaped and cared for by God, Who has already ordained their future. Therefore, any human being who interferes with, and cuts off, the life of an infant whom God is developing, is usurping the right of God the Creator.

David says (verse 13), "Thou hast possessed my reins [knit me together] . . . in my mother's womb [and] I will praise thee" (verse 14a). The word "possessed" means "to knit together," and the word "reins" refers to our "inward parts," the inner organs of the body. The DNA molecule, which describes our makeup, appears already in the first cell at the time of conception. That same little molecule is constantly multiplying in the millions of cells which form the human body as it grows in the mother's womb.

Then the Psalmist continues in verse 14 by saying that we are "fearfully and wonderfully made." The human body is a masterpiece of creation in many ways. The average person's heart beats 104,000 times every 24 hours. That is about 38 million times a year. There are 25 trillion red cells in the blood stream, and more than 60,000 miles of blood vessels in the average human body. There are 125,000,000 nerve endings in the human eye. Each square-inch of skin contains 650 sweat glands, and each has a little drain pipe to allow poisons to exit from the body.

I once heard Dr. Ben Carson, the world-renowned brain surgeon who separated conjoined twins, say, "I will never get over the awe I sense at the complexity of the human brain." Job declares, "Thou hast clothed me with skin and flesh, and hast fenced me [knit me together] with bones and sinews" (Job 10:11).

4. God's Holiness Searches Hearts (139:19-24)

God judges us righteously. God's attributes of *love* and *mercy* do not invalidate His attributes of *justice* and *holiness*. The final six verses of the psalm emphasize God's holiness and His requirement that we separate from all ungodliness.

God not only *forgives* sins, He also *punishes* sins. In this section, David contrasts God's care for the righteous with God's judgment upon the wicked.

The Psalmist was angered by the sin that was evident all around him. David uttered some harsh words about the wicked in verses 19-22, and these words can be explained by the fact that he was expressing hatred (verse 21)—not so much for his own enemies—but for those who rose up against God.

There is such a thing as "holy hatred"—that is, we may righteously abhor those who mount attacks on the Creator and the Sustainer of the universe. If we love God, we must hate and oppose the wickedness of God's enemies. This includes the teachers in cult groups, and liberal theologians who make fun of the Bible. Of course, we must remember that just as God's love and justice act together without contradiction, so we also must not allow our holy hatred to act in violation of the love God has

commanded us to show toward others. The Apostle Paul admonishes us, “Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:21).

In light of God’s complete knowledge and His absolute holiness, all of us are to do as David did in verses 23-24: we must invite God to *probe* and *search* our hearts so that He may cleanse us of anything that is contrary to His will. David’s concern was that in weakness, or in times of carelessness, he might grieve God.

David said in essence—point out my sins, O God, and show me my weaknesses. David wanted to be made aware of those things that grieved the Lord. He wanted to know about anything that was disrupting his communion with God. So he invited God to turn on the bright white light of His holiness, probing into his heart and purging out every trace of sin.

Edwin Orr wrote these words:

“Search me, O God, and know my heart today;
Try me, O Savior, know my thoughts, I pray;
See if there be some wicked way in me,
Cleave me from every sin, and set me free.”

It seems that David’s outer life was upright. His downsitting and uprising had been searched, and David felt comfortable with it. He said in verse 2, “Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising.” But later he said, “know my heart . . . and know my thoughts” (verse 23), “and see if there be any wicked way in me” (verse 24). David was aware that his inner life could use improvement. So in the last verses of the psalm, he prayed that God would help him to keep his feet in the way of the righteous.

The Psalmist wanted God to search him out thoroughly and to purge him of anything that might be offensive to God, so that he might walk in the way everlasting.

The “way everlasting” (verse 24) indicates that there is more than one way. Indeed, there are two ways: there’s the broad road that leads to destruction, and the narrow road that leads to Heaven.

God knows all that there is to know. He discerns our motives. There is nothing about us that God does not know.

We should be delighted in His all-knowing care. We should feel blessed by the fact that He is our heavenly Father. Surely we should want to do all that we can to please Him Who has so carefully provided for us and guarded us down through the years.

Sincere Christian believers should be comforted by the truths of the 139th Psalm. God, Who knows even the worst about us, has dealt with us in mercy in spite of our failings, and time and again has given us a new start!

The teaching of the 139th Psalm is this:

- God’s knowledge—God knows us intimately
- God’s presence—God is with us constantly

- God's power—God made us wonderfully
- God's holiness—God judges us righteously

If you have never found forgiveness for your sins by embracing the blood of Christ and making a commitment to live for Him, be assured that one day you will appear before God to give an account of your life (Romans 12:12). At that time He will unfold the record of your sinful past, and you will stand speechless before Him Who is the Judge of all the earth.

Mario Livio, an astrophysicist at the Space Telescope Science Institute, said (as reported in the April 21, 2015 edition of *The Washington Post*) that the resolution of the Hubble Space Telescope is akin to reading the date on a dime that is two miles away. But that telescope can only see *the surface*. Our amazing, all-knowing God, by way of contrast, sees *beneath the surface, into our hearts* (Jeremiah 17:10).

That can cause fear if we are ignoring Him. However, He also knows and sees our heart's desire to please Him, if that is our goal in life. Hopefully when we come to the end of life's journey, all of us will want to be on God's side, and we will want to be able to say that by God's grace (His undeserved kindness to us), we have sought to walk in His ways.

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