

Psalm 139

The everlasting presence and power of God
To the chief Musician, A Psalm of David.

Psalm 139: Certainly one of the grandest psalms in all of the Psalter, it is also one of the richest theologically.

This psalm combines an exposition of the greatness of God's character along with the reality of human experience.

(From verses 19-22), we find that David wrote the psalm during a time of opposition.

It therefore contains truths that were meaningful to him during these troublesome times.

They may be summarized under four key thoughts as David addresses the LORD: You know me (verses 1-6), you are with me (verses 7-12), you created me (verses 13-18), and your cause is my cause (verses 19-24).

The comparative attributes of God contrast human abilities with the divine nature.

Everyone has some knowledge, but only God has all knowledge (omniscience).

Everyone has presence, but only God has presence at all times everywhere (omnipresence).

Every person has some degree of power, but only God has unlimited power (omnipotence).

Psalm 139 lays a foundation for understanding the comparative attributes.

The omniscience of God is seen (in verses 1-6).

The omnipresence of God is seen (in verses 7-11).

The omnipotence of God is seen (in verses 12-16).

A Christian's response to the comparative attributes of God should be to surrender to His leadership because He is wise, He is able to protect us, and He knows the true way to life with Himself (Gen. 3:8, Psalm 139:1; compare Eph. 1:8).

Verses 1-24:

This intensely personal Davidic psalm expresses the psalmist's awe that God knew him, even to the minutest detail.

David might have remembered the LORD's words, "the LORD looks at the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7).

The exact occasion is unknown.

- I. God's Omniscience (139:1-6);
- II. God's Omnipresence (139:7-12);
- III. God's Omnipotence (139:13-18);
- IV. David's Obeisance (139:19-24).

Verses 1-6:

God knows everything about David.

Psalm 139:1 "O LORD, thou hast searched me, and known [me]."

"Searched me":

As it has been in David's life, he prays later that it will continue to be (compare verses 23-24).

David understands that nothing inside of him can be hidden from God.

This is speaking of the all knowing God.

God's eyes can look into our heart and read us like a book.

He not only knows what we have done and said, but he knows why we did those things.

He knows whether we really love Him or whether that too is a facade.

If you truly love God, then you are overjoyed at the fact that He has searched you and knows what you are.

The world around us judges us for what they see.

God judges our heart.

Verses 2-6:

"My downsitting and ... uprising" is an Old Testament expression depicting the routines of life.

Whether a person is at rest or work, God sees and knows.

The "thou understandest my thought" positively overwhelmed David.

God cares about every detail of every person's life!

Psalm 139:2 "Thou knowest my downsitte and mine uprising, thou understandest my thought afar off."

In the various circumstances of life, thou knowest me.

Thou knowest me in one place as well as in another.

I cannot so change my position that thou wilt not see me, and that thou wilt not be perfectly acquainted with all that I say, and all that I do.

In every posture, in every movement, in every occupation, thou hast a full knowledge of me.

I cannot go out of thy sight; I cannot put myself into such a position that thou wilt not see me.

"Thou understandest my thought":

Hebrew, "As to my thought."

That is, thou seest what my plans are; what I design to do; "what I am thinking about."

A most solemn reflection! How unwilling would bad people be, would even good people be, to have those round about them know always "what they are thinking about."

"Afar off":

Not when the "thought" is far off; but "thou," being far off, thus seeing us as clearly as if you were near.

I cannot go to such a long distance from thee that thou wilt not see perfectly all that I am thinking about.

He knows everything about you.

Thank goodness that Satan does not know your thoughts.

Only God knows your thoughts.

The wonderful thing is that He not only knows your thoughts, but understands the reasons behind your thoughts.

He really knows us better than we know ourselves.

Psalm 139:3 "Thou compassed my path and my lying down, and art acquainted [with] all my ways."

The Targum adds, "to study in the law."

His walk in the daytime, and every step he took, and his lying down at night.

It denotes his perfect knowledge of all his actions, day and night.

He surrounds every path of man, that they cannot escape his knowledge.

Or, "thou winnowest", as some render the word; he distinguishes actions.

He discerns and separates the good from the bad, or the goodness of an action from the evil and imperfection of it.

As in winnowing, the wheat is separated from the chaff.

Or, "thou measures my squaring"; all his dimensions, his length and breadth, as he lay down in his bed.

"And art acquainted with all my ways":

The whole of his life and conversation, all his works and doings.

God knows all the evil ways and works of his people.

He takes notice of them, and chastises them.

And all their good works, and approves of and accepts them.

He knows from what principles of faith and love that they spring; and just in what manner they are performed.

And with what views, aims, and ends (see Rev. 2:2; Psalm 1:6).

Compasseth in this verse means to toss about.

Even when we are sleeping, He knows our subconscious thought.

I personally believe that God directs us many times by our dreams.

Psalm 139:4 "For [there is] not a word in my tongue, [but], lo, O LORD, thou knowest it altogether."

Expressed by it or upon it, just ready to be spoken.

Or, as the Targum, "when there is no word in my tongue:" so Aben Ezra, "before it was perfect in my tongue:" before it is formed there.

While it is in the mind, and not expressed, and even before that.

"But, LORD, thou knowest it altogether":

The whole of it, from whence it springs. The reason of it, what is designed, or the ends to be answered by it.

The LORD knows the good words of his people, which they speak to him in prayer, even before and while they are speaking them.

And what they say to one another in private conversation (Isa. 65:24).

See an instance of words known by Christ before spoken (in Luke 19:31).

This statement (in my tongue), means that He knows the words that we want to say that we have not said yet.

Psalms 139:5 "Thou hast beset me behind and before, and laid thine hand upon me."

"Beset me behind and before":

God used circumstances to limit David's actions.

The psalmist here, is speaking of a very close relationship with the LORD.

He is saying that He is going before him and clearing the way and He is guarding the back side as well.

Really if we are where we really need to be, we are in Him and He is in us.

Psalms 139:6 "[Such] knowledge [is] too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot [attain] unto it."

Meaning either the knowledge of himself, such as God had of him.

Which was vastly superior to what he had of himself.

And especially the knowledge of other persons and things, whether visible or invisible, in heaven, earth, or hell.

Things past, present, and to come.

Or else the manner in which God had known all this was amazing to him, and quite impenetrable by him.

That he did know him, his thoughts, his words and actions, and so those of all the others, was easy of belief.

But how he should know all this was past his conception, and that struck him with the profoundest admiration.

"It is high":

Sublime, out of his reach, beyond his comprehension.

"I cannot attain unto it":

Neither to such knowledge, nor to comprehend what it is in God.

And how he should have it, and in what manner he exercises it.

Kimchi, Jarchi, and Aben Ezra, connect the words with the following.

As if the matter of his wonder and astonishment was the omnipresence of God, or where he should find a place to flee from him.

“Too wonderful” (compare Psalm 131:1; Rom. 11:33-36).

This is so far beyond our understanding.

Of course, as I have said before, the fact that He created the earth and everything in it is beyond my comprehension as well.

When you think of someone who has no beginning and has no end is beyond our understanding as well.

Verses 7-12:

God is near.

What’s more, He is immediately accessible wherever His children go.

God sent His Son into the world as a living picture of who He is and how present He is, Immanuel, God with us (Matt. 1:23).

God was always watching over David and thus it was impossible to do anything over which God is not a spectator.

Psalm 139:7 "Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence?"

“Thy spirit”:

A reference to the Holy Spirit (compare Psalms 51:11; 143:10).

See “The Anointing of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament” (at Psalm 51).

God is omnipresent, which means He is everywhere all at the same time.

You would not be able at all to get away from that.

We are looking into a mystery that is far beyond comprehension of the mortal mind.

The psalmist is comforted in knowing the presence of God.

Psalm 139:8 "If I ascend up into heaven, thou [art] there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou [art there]."

The word translated “hell” here refers to “the grave” or “the place of the dead” rather than the place of eternal punishment for unbelievers.

David asserts that God is, in fact, everywhere.

Death cannot separate the believer from Him (Rom. 8:38-39; 2 Cor. 5:8).

And when His people worship, they have an incredible sense of His manifest presence (22:3).

One of the greatest promises to me, in all the Bible, is that He will never leave us or forsake us.

His throne is in the highest heaven and that is home to Him, but He is also wherever His people are, even to the depths of hell.

Psalm 139:9 "[If] I take the wings of the morning, [and] dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea;"

“Wings of the morning”:

In conjunction with “the remotest part of the sea,” David now uses this literary figure that express distance.

Psalm 139:10 "Even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me."

For he could not get there with all the assistance of the wings of the morning.

Could they be had, without the leadings of divine Providence.

And when there, being a good man, should experience the leadings of divine grace.

Let the people of God be where they will, so he heads them as a parent with child, teaching him to go.

And as a shepherd his flock, into green pastures, and to fountains of living water.

He leads to himself, and to his Son by his Spirit; into communion and fellowship with them, and to a participation of all blessings of grace.

He guides them with his counsel, and directs all their ways and going.

"And thy right hand shall hold me":

The LORD lays hold on his people, and then apprehends them for himself, and claims his interest in them.

He holds them in his ways, that they slip and fall not.

He upholds them with the right hand of his righteousness, and they are safe.

And he holds them from going into or on in wrong ways to their hurt.

Even if I had wings like an eagle and could fly to some remote part of the earth where there would be a little hidden sea.

The LORD would be there.

The Right Hand (Jesus), would be there to help me just as He is here.

We are His creation and He is concerned about us wherever we are.

Psalm 139:11 "If I say, Surely the darkness shall cover me; even the night shall be light about me."

The darkness of a cloud or of the night, so that my actions shall not be seen.

That is, if I entertain such a thought in my mind, that what I do in the dark will escape the sight and knowledge of God, and so be emboldened to commit it.

"Even the night shall be light about me":

And make all my works manifest, as light does.

Have you ever been alone on a very dark night?

For those who do not know the LORD, this is a very frightening situation.

For the Christian, we are comforted in knowing, though the night be dark around us, He is there to help us.

He is the Light of the world.

We can be comforted in knowing that we have the Light with us in this darkness.

Psalm 139:12 "Yea, the darkness hideth not from thee; but the night shineth as the day: the darkness and the light [are] both alike [to thee]."

Anything that is done by men in it; or "darkeneth not from thee", or causeth such darkness as to hinder the sight of any action committed.

The Targum is, "from thy Word" (see Heb. 4:12).

"But the night shineth as the day; or "enlightens as the day", gives as much light with respect to God as the day does.

"The darkness and the light are both alike to thee":

As is the one, so is the other.

The day gives him no more light than the night, and the night no more darkness than the day.

He sees as well, as clearly and distinctly, in the one as in the other.

The psalmist expresses the same thing in different words three or four times, as Kimchi observes, to show that so the LORD is, that thus it is with him.

He has as clear a discerning of all the things done in the darkest night as at bright noon day (see Job 34:21).

The darkness can not prevail against the Light.

The Light will always do away with darkness.

It matters not whether this darkness is spiritual or physical.

The only way the darkness and light are alike is that they both are controlled by Him.

Verses 13-18:

God's power is magnified in the development of human life before birth.

Verses 13-16:

Here is the basis for the self-esteem and self-worth of believers: God made each person.

God knew each one before he or she was even born, and He knew the moment that he or she had been conceived.

And He is present at every phase of development from that moment on.

Psalm 139:13 "For thou hast possessed my reins: thou hast covered me in my mother's womb."

“Possessed ... covered”:

By virtue of the divinely designed period of pregnancy, God providentially watches over the development of the child while yet in the mother’s womb.

The psalmist is assured that God has been caring for him even from the time he was in his mother’s womb.

Have you ever noticed the special care that God has taken in protecting His own even before they make a decision to follow Him?

In my own life it seems as if He has been leading and guiding me to this very moment to do this very thing.

Psalm 139:14 "I will praise thee; for I am fearfully [and] wonderfully made: marvelous [are] thy works; and [that] my soul knoweth right well."

I will not merely admire what is so great and marvelous, but I will acknowledge thee in a public manner as wise, and holy, and good.

As entitled to honor, love, and gratitude.

"I am fearfully and wonderfully made":

Thy infinite power and wisdom, manifested in the rare and curious structure of man’s body, doth fill me with wonder and astonishment.

And with the dread of thy majesty.

"Marvelous are thy works":

Both in the lesser world, man, and in the greater.

"My soul knoweth right well":

I am well assured, both by thy word, and by the contemplation and study of thy works.

To which I have much addicted myself, that they are wonderful.

Although I do not so accurately understand all the particulars of them as I would do.

Have you ever thought of what a miracle it really is for a child to be born with 10 fingers and 10 toes and with eyes to see and a mouth to speak?

To look at all the parts in the human body and know that God figured all of this out, is so far above what mortal man can do.

How could anyone doubt there is God.

The more you learn about the human body the more you should believe in the superiority of God.

Even the mind of man is the most intricate advanced computer in existence.

No wonder so many doctors, after beginning practice, believe in God.

Psalm 139:15 My substance was not hid from thee, when I was made in secret, [and] curiously wrought in the lowest parts of the earth."

"Secret ... lowest parts of the earth":

Used figuratively of the womb.

The mystery of how a human being can be formed from the sperm planted is so far above what we know.

I am still wondering how you can plant an acorn in the ground and a great oak tree comes.

The secret part of this is going on in the mother's womb, away from eyes of wonder.

When the baby is born, it is already developed into a living soul.

Psalm 139:16 "Thine eyes did see my substance, yet being unperfect; and in thy book all [my members] were written, [which] in continuance were fashioned, when [as yet there was] none of them."

"Thy book":

This figure of speech likens God's mind to a book of remembrance.

"None of them":

God sovereignly ordained David's life before he was conceived.

This is just saying, you alone know what I was made of.

God could see man, even before he picked up the clay to make him with.

We are formed in the hands of God.

He breathes life into us.

If we are His, He is still working with us, and shaping us with His hands into a vessel pleasing unto Him.

To the world, I may seem as nothing but clay, but in His eyes, He sees the finished product.

Verses 17-18:

His people are so cherished by God that He thinks of them at all times.

Even in this very moment.

David expresses his amazement at the infinite mind of God compared to the limited mind of man, especially as it relates to the physiology of human life (compare verses 13-16).

Psalm 139:17 "How precious also are thy thoughts unto me, O God! how great is the sum of them!"

On the word "thoughts," (see the notes at Psalm 139:2; compare Psalm 139:23).

The remark is made here doubtless in view of the numberless "thoughts" involved in planning and forming a frame so wondrous, and in the care necessary to bring it to perfection.

To develop it; to provide for it; to guard and defend it.

How many "thoughts" of a parent are employed in behalf of their children, in providing for them.

Teaching them; counseling them; anticipating their needs.

How many more thoughts are needful on the part of God in reference to each one of us.

For there are numberless things necessary for us which cannot occupy the mind of a parent.

Since the parent cannot accomplish these things for us; they do not lie within his province, or in his power.

"How great is the sum of them, literally, "How strong are the heads of them."

That is, the heading of them.

Or the summing up of them would be a task beyond the power of man.

And who "could" estimate the number of the "thoughts" necessarily bestowed on himself by his Maker in all the care exercised over him.

All the arrangements for his development and growth.

All that is done to defend him from danger and all that is indispensably providing for his needs.

All that was necessary to secure the salvation of his soul! (see the notes at Psalm 40:5).

What a wonderful thought to know that I am on His mind.

Each individual in all the earth is on His mind.

When Jesus hung on the cross and shed His precious blood, it was because we were on the mind of God.

He made a way for us where there seemed to be no way.

When I think upon this, it brings tears to my eyes, that He cared this much for you and me.

His thoughts are above our carnal thoughts.

Psalm 139:18 "[If] I should count them, they are more in number than the sand: when I awake, I am still with thee."

Numberless as the sand on the sea-shore.

"When I awake, I am still with thee":

When I am lost in deep and profound meditation on this subject, and am aroused again to consciousness, I find the same thing still true.

The fact of "my" being forgetful, or being lost in profound meditation, has made no difference with thee.

Thou art still the same; and the same unceasing care, the same thoughtfulness, still exists in regard to me.

Or, the meaning may be, sleeping or waking with me, it is still the same in regard to thee.

Thine eyes never close.

When mine are closed in sleep, thou art round about me.

When I awake from that unconscious state, I find the same thing existing still.

I have been lost in forgetfulness of thee in my slumbers; but thou hast not forgotten me.

There has been no change, no slumbering with thee.

If we were to compare His thoughts to ours: it would be as our thoughts are like one grain of sand and His thoughts are like all the grains of sands.

We cannot with this small mind of ours know the mind of God.

We are promised in the Word, that we can take on the mind of Christ if we are believers.

1 Corinthians 2:16 "For who hath known the mind of the Lord, that he may instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ."

This is saying that we know what the Lord would have us to do.

Psalm 139:19 "Surely thou wilt slay the wicked, O God: depart from me therefore, ye bloody men."

Compare the notes at (Isa. 11:4).

The literal translation of this would be, "If thou wilt slay the wicked."

It is not easy to account for the sudden and remarkable transition or diversion of the train of thought from the main subject of the psalm, in these verses (Psalm 139:19-22).

In which the psalmist gives vent to his feelings toward the wicked, and prays that they may depart from him.

Perhaps the explanation of it may be, that as the psalmist was reflecting on the fact that God is everywhere present.

That he searches the hearts of people, that he must know all their conduct, he was suddenly struck with the idea of the condition of wicked people in the presence, and under the eye, of such a Being.

As God knows all things, he must know them.

And this instantaneously suggested the idea of their guilt and danger.

People of such characters could not deceive such a God.

They could not but be known to him, and could not but be objects of his aversion.

They could not, therefore, but be in danger.

"Depart from me, therefore, ye bloody men" (see Psalm 119:115).

The Hebrew is, "Men of bloods;" that is, men who shed blood.

The language is used to denote wicked men in general.

The idea here is not that the psalmist was in danger from them at that time, but that he desired to be separate from that class of people.

He did not wish to be ranked with them, to partake of their conduct, or to share in their fate.

He had no sympathy with them, and he desired to be separate from them altogether.

When God slays the wicked, I do not want to be close by.

We have discussed how we must not fellowship with evil men.

It is as if you approve of their doings when you fellowship with them.

You would be guilty by association.

Psalm 139:20 "For they speak against thee wickedly, [and] thine enemies take [thy name] in vain."

Against his being, his perfections, his purposes, his providences, his doctrines, ordinances, ministers, and people.

Or "they speak of thee for wickedness".

They made mention of the name of God to cover their wickedness, pretending to fear God and love him.

To have a reverence of him and serve him, putting on a form of godliness, but then denying the power thereof.

"And thine enemies take thy name in vain":

Either by profane swearing, or by false swearing.

The Targum interprets both clauses of swearing deceitfully and vainly.

Or "he", that is, everyone that is "lifted up to vanity are thine enemies".

Whose hearts are lifted up to vanity, idols, riches, self-righteousness, sensual lusts and pleasures.

These are the enemies of God, who are estranged from him, hold friendship with the world, harbor his enemies, love what he hates, hate what he loves, and then commit acts of hostility against him.

The Septuagint, Vulgate Latin, Syriac, Arabic, and Ethiopic versions, read, "they take thy cities in vain".

If we are a Christian, truly, we can not bear to hear someone talking badly about our God.

Even worse than that would be to hear them curse His holy name.

Those who truly love God will not listen to this type of degrading conversation.

Psalm 139:21 "Do not I hate them, O LORD, that hate thee? and am not I grieved with those that rise up against thee?"

Wicked men are haters of God; of his word, both law and Gospel.

Of his ordinances, ways, and worship; of his people, cause, and interest.

And therefore, good men hate them.

Not as men, as the creatures of God, and as their fellow creatures, whom they are taught by the Gospel to love, to do good unto, and pray for; but as haters of God.

And because they are so; not their persons, but their works.

And for the truth of this the omniscient God is appealed unto.

"And am not I grieved with those that rise up against thee?"

As wicked men do, in their hearts, in their words, and in their actions.

They rebel against God, and contend with him, which is folly and madness.

And this is grieving to good men, because of their insolence and impudence.

The ruin and destruction they expose themselves to.

And the dishonor done to God.

And this arises from their great love and strong affection for him, not being able to bear such behavior to him.

As a man is filled with grief and indignation when another rises up against his father or his friend (see Psalm 119:136).

This is righteous jealousy for the name of God.

The LORD's enemies and the enemies of the Christian should be the same.

It breaks my heart to hear someone curse the name of God.

Psalm 139:22 "I hate them with perfect hatred: I count them mine enemies."

“With perfect hatred”:

David has no other response to God’s enemies than that of hatred, i.e., he is not neutral toward them nor will he ever ally himself with them.

This hatred is not so much of the person as what the person is doing.

This type of hatred is not sin.

Verses 23-24:

In light of (verses 19-22), David invites God to continue searching his heart to root out any unrighteousness, even when it is expressed against God’s enemies.

Psalm 139:23 "Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts:"

He had searched him, and knew his heart thoroughly.

"Try me, and know my thoughts":

He had tried him, and knew every thought in him (Psalm 139:1).

This therefore is not said for the sake of God; who, though he is the trier of hearts, and the searcher of the reins, is indeed a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart at once.

And knows immediately what is in man. And needs no testimony of him, nor to make use of any means in order to know him and what is within him.

But David said this for his own sake, that God would search and make known to him what was in his heart.

And try him by his word, as gold is tried in the fire.

Or by anything difficult and self-denying, as he tried Abraham.

Or by any afflictive providence; or in any way he thought fit to make him acquainted thoroughly with himself.

His sense is this, that if he knew his own heart and thoughts, and the inward frame and disposition of his soul, it was as he had expressed it.

That he was grieved with sinners, and hated those that hated the LORD.

Even with a perfect hatred, and reckoned them as his enemies.

But if it was actually otherwise, he desired to be searched and then tried thoroughly, so that it might be discovered.

And he might say this also on account of others, who charged him falsely with things he was not conscious of.

But that never entered into his thoughts, and his heart knew nothing of, and thus could not accuse him with.

And therefore he appeals to the heart searching God, that he would so lay open things that his integrity and innocence might appear to all. (see Gen. 22:1).

The psalmist (probably David), is assured that when God looks into his heart he will find nothing but love for God.

Thoughts come from the heart.

If our heart is right, then the thoughts that we have will be pure thoughts as well.

One very good reason for a request like this would be, for God to find anything that needs to be changed and help him change.

Psalm 139:24 "And see if [there be any] wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."

“The way everlasting”:

David expresses his desire/expectation of eternal life (see notes on Phil. 1:6).

The psalmist here, is asking for a spiritual house cleaning.

The one who leads us and guides us and teaches us is the Holy Spirit of God.

Every one of us have something in our life that could be improved upon.

We need to join in with this psalmist and ask God to search our innermost being and to purge out those things which be not of God.

The best way to get rid of any darkness that we might have hidden away, is for us to turn the Light on it.

The Light does away with all darkness.

Psalm 139 Questions

1. In verse one, who had searched him and known him?
2. The world around us judges us by what they can see, God judges our _____.
3. Besides knowing your thoughts, what does God know?
4. What does compasses mean?
5. The author believes God sometimes directs us in our _____.
6. What does (in my tongue) mean?
7. What is verse 5 speaking of?
8. What are some things about God that are absolutely beyond our understanding?
9. Why is it impossible to go where God is not?
10. From verse 8, what is the greatest promises in the Bible?
11. What are we to the Right Hand of God?
12. What comfort does the Christian have in the darkness?
13. Darkness can not prevail against the _____.
14. I will praise thee for I am _____, and _____ made.
15. What is the mind of man?
16. What is the secret spoken of in verse 15?
17. What is verse 16 saying, about the knowledge of God?
18. He made a way for us where there seemed to be _____.

19. Compare our thoughts to God's thoughts.
20. Since God will destroy the wicked, the psalmist tells _____ to depart from him?
21. When you fellowship with evil people, what is it as if you are doing?
22. Thine enemies take thy name in _____.
23. Who is it not a sin to hate?
24. Search me O God, and know my _____.
25. Why would we want the LORD to do this?