

Psalms of David

Psalm 139, You made me!

[Please note : English Standard Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]

Introduction

There are 150 Psalms in what, in the English Bible, is called simply “the Book of Psalms”, although it is really five books collected together, and some Bibles show where each of these begins and ends. Seventy three of these Psalms, just under half of the total, are attributed to David.

David, who rose to nationwide acclaim as a youth because of his victory over the giant Goliath, and then humbly and patiently endured many years of unjust persecution under the then King Saul, subsequently went on, after Saul’s death, to become Israel’s great warrior king. But he was also a gifted poet and musician. In this capacity he is called in scripture “the sweet psalmist of Israel”¹, and today’s talk is the first in a six part series looking at what are perhaps some of the best loved of David’s compositions.

The Psalm we are going to look at today, Psalm 139, is, to me at any rate, a joy to read and a joy to speak about.

David’s lot was cast in the days of the old covenant, the “special relationship”, if we may use that expression, which existed between God and His earthly people Israel. In contrast with the relationship with God which David knew, we, who are Christian believers today, enjoy a standing before God which far outshines it. We, being justified (counted as righteous) by faith, have peace with God². We live in the light of the finished work of redemption, accomplished by the Lord Jesus Christ through His death on the cross. We are united indissolubly with Him, our risen Lord, seated at the right hand of the Majesty on High³. We have been sealed with the Holy Spirit as a guarantee of our future inheritance in Heaven⁴.

And yet, despite the far greater blessings which we as Christians possess, David enjoyed, throughout his life, a settled relationship with God and a cloudless peace secured in his unwavering faith. David’s day by day walk with God is something which, if I speak for myself, I often feel puts us to shame.

My plan is to look at the Psalm in six sections, and we’ll look at each section under a heading drawn from a key phrase which seems to me to speak of the essence of the section’s content.

My six headings are:

Verses 1 to 6: God has searched me and known me.

Verses 7 to 12: Where shall I go from your Spirit?

Verses 13 to 16: I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

Verses 17 & 18: How precious are God’s thoughts!

Verses 19 to 22: Oh that you would slay the wicked, O God!

And finally,
Verses 23 & 24: Search me, O God!

But before we launch into the first of those, let's read Psalm 139 right through. I'm reading from the English Standard Version.

To the Choirmaster. A psalm of David.

O LORD, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O LORD, you know it altogether. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it. Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me. If I say, Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night, even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you. For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, - intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them. How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! If I would count them, they are more than the sand. I awake, and I am still with you. Oh that you would slay the wicked, O God! O men of blood, depart from me! They speak against you with malicious intent; your enemies take your name in vain! Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you? I hate them with complete hatred; I count them my enemies. Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!

Verses 1 to 6 : God has searched me and known me

Over the first six verses I've placed the heading "God has searched me and known me." In these verses David voices his wonder and amazement that the Lord knows all that there is to know about him. He knows every step David takes, and every word he speaks, even before it is spoken. David has discovered what the woman of Sychar in Samaria is going to discover so many centuries later, that there is Someone who can tell her everything she has ever done⁵.

All of us need to make this discovery, that God knows every intimate detail about us. If we don't make it in this present life, then of a certainty we will make it when this life is over. How do we react? It may be that we react with resentment. Have I no privacy? Is there no hiding place from the eye of the all-knowing God?

We may wonder if there is just a suggestion of this in verse 5 when David says, "You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me." And yet I don't really discern any resentment on

David's part. It seems rather just to enhance his wonder at God's knowledge. For in the next verse he says, "such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it."

Rather than there being any thought of resentment, however, it is possible to have a quite different, and much happier, reaction to the realisation that God knows us through and through. Do you ever feel, and feel perhaps with a deep and inconsolable sadness, that there is no-one in the whole world who really and truly understands you? To know God as David did, or better still, to know Him as He has now made Himself known in the Lord Jesus, the Man of Sycar, the Friend of sinners⁶, the Man of Calvary, is the complete answer to that feeling. There is no need any longer to feel that you are alone, that there is no heart that beats as yours.

"Unfathomable wonder,
And mystery divine!
The voice that speaks in thunder,
Says, 'Sinner I am thine'" ⁷

Verses 7 to 12: Where shall I go from your Spirit?

Next, let's look at verses 7 to 12, over which I've placed the heading "Where shall I go from your Spirit?" Here, David poses what, in my view, is an entirely hypothetical question. What I think he is really saying is, "Suppose I did want to get away from God, where would I go?", and he then concludes that there is indeed nowhere where this could be achieved.

Sheol, by the way, in verse 8, is the realm of departed spirits, often spoken about in the Old Testament. It is seen as a gloomy, shadowy place. It is understood in the Old Testament that when a person dies, the body is laid in the grave, where it sees corruption, but the spirit goes to Sheol, awaiting the future judgement.

After Christ's great victory, in dying and then rising from amongst the dead, all this was changed. Christian believers, anticipating the moment of death, now look forward to a "far better" place, where we will be with Christ⁸, though this is still, as it were, a waiting place. It is not yet Heaven, or perhaps more accurately, the Father's house⁹, which will follow only after the resurrection, and reunion of the spirit with the new body which all believers in Christ are promised¹⁰.

The prophet Jonah supposed that he could escape from God's presence by boarding a ship and sailing to a distant land¹¹. David has more wisdom than that. He is quite clear that even if he could avail himself of "the wings of the morning", which I take to be a poetic expression for some heavenly mode of transport, there is no conceivable destination he could fly to which would be beyond the reach of God's presence. Nor would there be any point in waiting for the hours of darkness to hide from God, for night and day are all equally transparent to Him.

As I read these verses, I don't get the impression that David in any way regrets the fact that it is impossible to escape from God. It is rather that he takes great comfort from it. "Even there" he says in verse 10, "Your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me." In other words, wherever he may go, he will still be guided and protected by God's invincible hand.

Verses 13 to 16: I am fearfully and wonderfully made

Over verses 13 to 16 I've placed the heading "I am fearfully and wonderfully made." Here David's thought moves on, and he asks, it seems to me, the question: "How has it come about that God knows every tiny detail about me?" The explanation is that it is because He was my Creator. In fact, David's understanding of God as Creator is something over and above what we normally mean by that title. When we speak of God as Creator, I suspect that, normally, we are thinking of the universe as like a vast and complex machine, which God has originally designed and made, but which He has then left, as it were, to run by itself.

But David's understanding of God as Creator is closer to what is said of the Lord Jesus in Hebrews chapter 1 verse 3, that He "upholds the universe by the word of his power." God has not simply kick-started the universe and then left it to run independently of Him. It relies upon Him to maintain it moment by moment. So, as David ponders the process whereby an unborn child is formed in its mother's womb, he describes how he was "knitted together" by God, and how he was "intricately woven in the depths of the earth." He understands that God was intimately involved in every small detail of his being brought into being.

I have read a comment to the effect that "the depths of the earth" is simply a poetic way of saying that the development of a child in its mother's womb is a process which goes on, as it were, in secret, hidden away; but I feel there must be more than that in this mysterious reference. Is it perhaps an allusion to the fact that Adam was made of dust from the ground¹², and that scripture views us all as being "still in the loins of our ancestors" before we are born¹³. When we look at things in this way, it follows that David was already in the loins of Adam when Adam was formed.

The story of how each of us took shape, from a single cell to a fully developed, ready to be born, child, is one we do well to marvel at. For all the advances in developmental biology, I don't believe we really know very much about it. To take just one small example of its mystery, how is it that, as that cell divides and divides, one part knows that it is meant to develop into a head, whilst the cells on the opposite side know to develop into feet? How amazing is that? David's words are surely as relevant today as when he wrote them, "I am fearfully and wonderfully made."

Verse 16 reminds us that God knows the number of our days as well. They are all, as it were, written in His book.

Verses 17 & 18: How precious are God's thoughts!

I've placed the heading "How precious are God's thoughts!" over the next pair of verses, verses 17 and 18.

If we take these verses in a straightforward and literal way, they seem to express three observations. Firstly, David says that God's thoughts are precious to him. He really treasures them. Secondly, he stands in awe of the sheer number of God's thoughts, and thirdly he returns to the theme of God's omnipresence. When he awakes, God is still there.

But it seems to me that to grasp what David is really getting at here, we need to merge the three things into one. These verses follow from what has gone before in the earlier part of the psalm. David is expressing his adoration of the God who, as it were, has His finger on the pulse of the entire universe. Using present day understanding and terminology, we would say that God controls the behaviour of every atom that exists in every distant galaxy, yet, at one and the same time, concerns Himself with the smallest details of our individual lives.

Verses 19 to 22: Oh that you would slay the wicked, O God!

In the remaining six verses of the psalm, David switches from expressing his wonder and adoration of God, and goes over to making requests. I can't help noticing, then, that he spends three quarters of the Psalm in giving praise and glory to God and only one quarter in asking Him for things. This is a pattern we would all do well to follow in our prayers. Most of us would probably have to admit that, with us, it is more likely to be the other way round.

Over verses 19 to 22 I've placed the heading, taken from verse 19, "Oh that you would slay the wicked, O God!" It's important to understand that the hatred which David expresses here doesn't spring from some sense of injustice over something which David has himself suffered at the hands of those whom he here condemns. It all stems from David's love of God and his intense loyalty

towards God. David is angry with those he labels “the wicked”, because they speak maliciously against God, take His name in vain and rise up in rebellion against Him.

The sentiments which David expresses here are honest and righteous. God will indeed punish sin. He will execute judgment with absolute fairness¹⁴. And yet, it would not be right for us as Christians today to pray for God to slay the wicked! The Lord Jesus clearly taught, in the so-called Sermon on the Mount, that our stance towards those who hate God and ill-treat His servants should be the very opposite of this, something which the world finds incomprehensible! What He said was:

You have heard that it was said, You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust (Matthew 5 verses 43-45).

This is another instance of how the coming into the world of the Lord Jesus, and His death on the cross in order to save sinners, has changed everything. We are now living in the day when “the Gospel of the Grace of God”¹⁵ is being announced. The scope of that message is universal. It is addressed to every human being, regardless of gender, race or culture, and regardless of how deeply sunk in sin he or she may be.

John Newton, the one time slave ship captain who came to Christ, is perhaps best known as the author of the hymn “Amazing Grace.” When aged 82, and not long before his death, he said “My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: that I am a great sinner – and that Christ is a great Saviour.”

Rather than condemn our fellow men who continue in sin and rebellion against God, we are rather to be, like Paul,

Ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God (2 Corinthians 5:20).

Verses 23 & 24: Search me, O God!

The concluding two verses of the psalm, over which I have placed the heading “Search me, O God”, are to me the most precious of all.

David has been turning his attention to the actions of wicked men, and reflecting on their ways. One of the commonest causes of friction in human relationships, in families, in workplaces, is the ability, which I think we all have, to recognise faults in others, and yet be sometimes quite astonishingly blind to those same faults in ourselves. The Lord spoke of this when He said,

How can you say to your brother, Let me take the speck out of your eye, when there is the log in your own eye? (Matthew 7:4).

And the Scottish poet Robert Burns alluded to it in his famous lines:¹⁶

Oh wad some Pow'r the giftie gie' us, tae see oorsels as ithers see us.

What prayer could conceivably be more essential for all of us to pray, than the one which David voices here? Paraphrasing it, he says “Lord, I try to look within, and search my own heart, but I

know how easily I miss something. Please will You do the searching? Put Your finger on those wicked ways in my heart, which I am blind to, and lead me in “the Way everlasting.”

Let us all say Amen to David’s prayer!

Thank you for listening to this Truth for Today talk on Psalm 139 in our series on the psalms of David - talk number T1428. Scriptures were quoted from the English Standard Version.

¹2 Samuel 23:1 ²Romans 5:1 ³Hebrews 1:3 ⁴Ephesians 1:13-14 ⁵John 4:29 ⁶Matthew 11:19 ⁷W. Cowper 1731-1800 ⁸Philippians 1:23 ⁹John 14:2-3 ¹⁰2 Corinthians 5:1-2 ¹¹Jonah 1:3 ¹²Genesis 2:7 ¹³Hebrews 7:9-10 ¹⁴Revelation 20:11-12 ¹⁵Acts 20:24 ¹⁶Robert Burns (1759-96) “To a Louse”

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