Searched and Known

Psalm 139 Kimby Young

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Psalm 139 is one of my favorite Psalms. It is theologically rich, precisely structured, and a profoundly personal expression of faithfulness. It is in fact a prayer designed to be shared. Written by one person to offer to God, it is also a prayer that can help others to learn how to pray. Throughout history Psalm 139 has been used in worship and personal prayer, it has inspired music and poetry. It celebrates God’s very personal connection with and care for every single beloved believer, in fact every single beloved person in the world.

The psalm has a very clear outline with 4 stanzas each of 6 verses. The first three stanzas describe God – in this order – as omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent. But rather than an abstract theological description of God’s greatness, each stanza shows how God delivers this characteristic in a very personal relationship. What does it mean for us that God is all knowing, ever present and fully powerful.

The first 6 verses describe omniscience - the unlimited knowledge of God. But it specifically applies it that God knows everything about each of us. God knows when we sit down or rise up, when we come and go, wherever we go. God knows our thoughts even before we know them, our words before we express them, our actions – good and bad. God knows us, better than we know ourselves. And God helps us to understand ourselves and others better.

As the Psalmist says – sometimes that level of intimacy is too much for us. We cannot imagine God knowing our every move or thought. Sometimes it’s not a great feeling that God knows even our less than appropriate thoughts. It’s like when a curse word slips out on the highway, or I do something stupid in front of someone else. Or worse – when temptations or bad decisions win. God knows it. There is no hiding. The good news is – God really does know us, even with our faults and failures and God loves us still. God loves us always. God sees the best that we can be and tries to lead us in that direction – that’s the last verses of the Psalm.

The second stanza explores the omnipresence of God – the always here – always everywhere - nature of God. God is with us everywhere we go. I say it a lot and I mean it as reassurance. God is present and caring for us. The Psalm says God is in heaven and hell, day and night, light and darkness, even to the ends of the earth. The Psalm takes a turn – where can I go from your presence? Where can I flee? – as if we are running away from God, trying to hide. It picks up on that earlier thought of God seeing the good the bad and the ugly. We can not get away from God. Think of Adam and Eve hiding in the garden of Eden. Think about Jonah who tried to escape his call. Think about Paul persecuting the Christians and being blinded on the road to Damascus. Think of countless other stories of people trying to run away. If God is everywhere, it can feel a lot like pursuit – being chased by God.

But verses 11 and 12 have this wonderful twist – all about redemption and restoration. It says, “Surely the darkness shall cover me, and night wraps itself around me, (and here comes the twist) even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.” Do you see? God turns darkness into light. Even our fears, even our shame, even our mistakes, even our own personal darkness whatever that may be. God loves us so much that God turns it around. Darkness is as light. Pursuit is presence. Hiding becomes revealing. Running becomes readiness. God knows us so well and loves us so much, that God turns darkness into light, failure into hope, sin into forgiveness, loss into finding, and fear into love. God knows us and loves us. God is with us always and that is pure grace.

That leads to the third stanza about omnipotence – the power of God. Creation and transformation – God’s power alive in us. Our very presence is proof of God’s amazing power. Fearfully and wonderfully made. God knit each of us together – chose our cells and planted the uniqueness of all our gifts. Even before we were born God’s power was alive and active in the world – shaping the moment that would lead to our birth, the moments that would lead to this moment when we gather together to praise God. Our God of love is behind it all!. Our God is so great that God has designed everything to this point, and points us forward into the future of God’s grand design. Our destinies are known by God. And those destinies are filled with everything else that God is – grace, love, power and purpose. God has it all in mind. And we can’t even imagine every blessing God has planned for us. How vast is the sum! Bottom line is our destiny with God – I come to the end and I am still with you. The end of time, the end of our lives – whatever happens God will be with us.

You probably noticed I left out verses 19-22. Frankly, these verses break the tone for our modern ears. They are a very personal prayer of complaint about enemies. It continues the theme of God’s omnipotence. God is so powerful, that God is able to crush wickedness and pronounce judgment. God is able to control evil as well as good. The lesson for us is to offer God our concerns and complaints. God already knows them and God will deal with them. We don’t need vengeance or worry or fear, or anything that might distract us from God’s plan for us. Give it to God and remember God’s love, presence and power.

The last two verses assume that God will take care of anything we need. In fact verses 23 and 24 mirror the whole outline of the psalm – echoing God’s omniscience, omnipresence and omnipotence. God knows and sees – Search me and know my heart. God is with us – testing and knowing our thoughts and concerns. God is powerful enough to transform – seeing both the good and the wicked in our paths, changing what needs to change, and leading us in the right way, the way of eternal life.

Ultimately this beautiful prayer asks God to be in every single part of our lives so that we can recognize God with us. The Psalm asks that we might reflect the image of God we were created to be – sharing God’s omniscience, omnipresence and omnipotence. That we might know God as God knows us. That we might strive to be with God as God is always with us. Loving God as God so loves each and every one of us. That we might give all power and glory to God that God may bless our lives with grace and peace.

In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

October 8, 2023

Psalm 139:1-18 and 23-24

1 O Lord, you have searched me and known me.

2 You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away.

3 You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways.

4 Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely.

5 You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.

6 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.

7 Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?

8 If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

9 If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

10 even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.

11 If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me, and night wraps itself around me,”

12 even the darkness is not dark to you;

the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.

13 For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb.

14 I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.

15 My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret,

intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

16 Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written

all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed.

17 How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!

18 I try to count them—they are more than the sand; I come to the end—I am still with you.

23 Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts.

24 See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.