

Psalm 139 – The way everlasting

Introduction

It's been said that Psalm 139 would be among 'the most beautiful in the Psalter if it finished at v 18¹ – before we get to that part about hating the wicked and wishing their destruction. Lately I've been in the habit of praying this psalm with my daughter as she goes to bed because it teaches us some of the great truths about who God is and how we interact with him in the day-to-day of life. But I admit I do skip over that tricky section at the end – not because I don't think its valuable or has anything to say to us, but because there's a bit of interpretive work that we need to do on that passage. That's work that I can't quite fit into a quick prayer with my daughter but hopefully we'll get through some of it today.

The psalm is broken into four sections, the last of which is that bit about hating God's enemies (and we'll get to that later). The first three sections of the psalm talk entirely about God, and he is the main actor throughout the psalm. The first section is about God's knowledge of us and what we do and think (before a word is on my tongue you Lord know it completely). The second section is about God's infinite presence with us (where can I go from your Spirit? where can I flee from your presence?). And then thirdly we read of God's creative work of bringing each of us into being (my frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, woven together in the depths of the Earth). And there's great comfort and knowledge we can draw from these verses thinking about God's infinite-ness in a positive light.

But the way we interpret the final section I think changes the way we might read what comes before. Verses 19-24 are, I think, a declaration of allegiance to God and a statement of integrity. The psalmist distances himself from the wicked and aligns himself firmly and confidently with God (do I not hate those that hate you, he prays). If we take this as the context, we could read the preceding sections as a sort of proof that God knows the author, he knows his innermost being and will surely know that he has been faithful, that he is allied with God

¹ Allen, Psalms 101-150, 254.

and not God's enemies. There also seems to be a bit of a sense of fear and confinement at having every thought and action fall under God's watchful eye – we cannot flee God's presence even if we hide in the darkness.

So there's sort of these two threads running through the psalm or interpretive lenses we can bring to it. On the one hand there is the sense of God's constant watch, we are fully contained within God – which can be a bit scary. And on the other hand, the psalmist reveals God's infinite nature to us making these huge theological statements that have echoed through Jewish and Christian history.

So what I want to do is try to trace these two elements through the psalm. Both shades of the psalm speak to different aspects of the Christian life and God's word is profound enough, and deep enough, and complex enough to hold these aspects together. So let's jump in.

All knowing God

We open with 'You have searched me Lord and you know me'. Right from the get-go the psalm is deeply personal. God is not some far-off deity that is uninterested in human affairs. He knows us. He sees our movements and our actions and even our thoughts before we think them. The psalmist doesn't speak of God in abstract philosophical terms like you might get with the Greeks, but always as the God who is actively involved in his life. God is searching and discerning the details of the lives of the people he created, not disinterested or just observing our comings and goings on this distant planet. God doesn't need creation or humans to be God but he's bound himself to us in covenant and made himself concerned with us. So much so that he comes and searches us to know who we are and what we're up to. God has made it his business to be interested in us, personally and lovingly. Nowhere do we see this more clearly than in Jesus, in whom God has bound himself irreversibly to humanity. God wants to be with us and live with us so that he can know us and we can know him.

Pretty incredible, right? God is interested and involved in every moment of our lives. And yet there is a sense of tension and confinement that comes out in the psalm. The author finds himself as the object of God's watchful eye, nothing escaping his oversight. Hemmed in behind

and before, like he's been sewn into a pillowcase. I don't mean by this that God is unreasonably restrictive or oppressive or doesn't allow us any freedom. Of course not, we have a remarkable level of freedom given we are completely dependent and contingent on God for our very existence. But the psalmist is also aware that not even his thoughts are safe from God's knowledge. We get the feeling that it might be nice to sometimes be able to live outside of God's field of vision. But God is always behind us and before us.

I think there are times where we all wish God wasn't across every thought we have. Where we could maybe just get away with a little bit without God knowing about it. But ultimately, the knowledge God has of the psalmist turns out to be a good thing, even if it is scary. If we take the context of this psalm, as I proposed earlier, to be a declaration of allegiance to God, then God is perfectly aware of all the actions that indicate faithfulness and allegiance. And the psalmist is very aware that every action and thought he makes occurs as part of a world that extends beyond himself and includes the ultimate reality and mind of God. Every action, every thought is part of our relationship with God. There is no hiding here, but there is also no false accusation – God knows if the psalmist has been faithful. And he makes the most of this as he stands before God and makes his case. The unbounded knowledge of God might be scary, but it can work in the favour of the faithful.

All present God

So then we come to the second section of the psalm where we move from God's knowledge of us to his being ever present among us. 'Where can I go from you Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?' Just as there is no thought that escapes God's knowledge, there is also no nook or cranny in his creation where he is not present personally. The Spirit that hovered over the waters in Genesis 1 before the world was formed, is still present today. And so the psalmist then expands on this idea.

'If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.' From the heights of God's dwelling place in the heavens to the depths, literally 'Sheol', Hades, the place of the dead, God is present.

'If I rise on the wings of dawn; if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.' From the east where the sun takes flight over the horizon in the morning to the far side of the sea where it sets in the evening – to the west of Israel (across the Mediterranean) – God is present and active in every inch.

It's lovely imagery that tells us God is always present and never far from us. When we are alone in the garden as Jesus was at Gethsemane, God is with us. When we feel dejected, devalued, God is present and it's in his knowing us that we are valuable. We may forget our friends and family, or they may forget us, but God will never forget us, he will always know us and that makes us valuable. Jesus is tangible, historical evidence that God actually is all the things this psalm proclaims. Jesus is the one person that has been both in heaven at the right hand of the Father and buried in the depths, and lived to tell the tale. He shows us that God's presence is indeed everywhere. Death did not separate Jesus from his Father. When darkness surrounded Jesus, God's mighty hand broke the shackles of the grave and raised him back to life.

I often find it's when I feel I've been surrounded by darkness that the presence of God's hand is most comforting and strengthening. Those are the times I've found this psalm most helpful – telling myself these truths in the moments they seem most distant somehow brings them close again and brings me closer to God as I align my thoughts and feelings to the truth revealed in his word.

In the opening verses of John's gospel we read that in Jesus the light came to shine in the darkness of this world – words that echo Psalm 139. That light gives light to everyone, and by believing in Jesus, a deposit of that light lives in us and can give us an inkling of the light that exists in God even when we feel the darkness of this world so deeply. One day the night we experience will fully turn to day when Jesus comes to fully restore creation to right order.

This sense of hope in the psalm, particularly when read in light of Jesus's life, is definitely valid. But there is another way to read it that speaks of the inescapability of God. In verse 7 the psalmist looks to flee from God, to somehow escape his watchful eye (where can I flee from

your presence?). Then verse 11: 'Surely the darkness will hide me'. The confinement and claustrophobia from the first section prompt the psalmist to try and look for an escape. But as we just saw, there is no escape. We might try to hide in the darkness, but the darkness will not be dark to God. Instead of a comforting and leading hand in verse 10, the psalmist feels it to be bounding and containing him, holding him fast and preventing him from fleeing. If we think of this psalm in the context of a declaration of allegiance again, the author knows that everywhere he's been, God has been there with him. His life – like yours and mine – is completely immersed in the life of God.

Ultimately the inescapability and infinite knowledge of God is reason for praise. It's his awesomeness, his infinite-ness, his incomprehensibility that makes him God. A life lived within the bounds of God is better than one that is ungoverned or unknown. We will also see that God's mercy and faithfulness are the antidote to our failings because he is willing to lead us in the way everlasting. The benefits of God's omnipresence certainly outweigh the cons and the psalmist's fear turns to praise as he reflects on the root cause of God's knowledge in the third section of the psalm.

Creator God

Here the two threads of interpretation that we've been trying to keep track of come together. 'I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made.' This is why God knows us intimately. Why does God know our every thought? Why does the darkness shine like the day for God? The answer comes in verse 13: 'For you created my inmost being'. What could be more personal? What would better qualify God to know us and guide us? And more to the point, this is reason to praise and trust God. This is where the psalmist's fears and dreams of fleeing God turn to trust. Fearfully and wonderfully made we are. Not carelessly and without thought. 'It is because God has created everything that he knows everything.'² He saw us before we were created – knit together in the womb, made in the secret place, woven together in the depths of the Earth. And he ordained all the days of our lives before we took a breath. He

² Weiser, *The Psalms*, 805.

knows the end from the beginning and forms us with the care of a craftsman. I remember hearing my first daughter's heartbeat for the first time – when her heart wasn't much more than a few cells held together in the womb. And it was such a special knowledge of such a special thing. And how much more does God know us!

But there still remains a sense of the unknowability of God. In verse 6 we have 'Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain.' There is no way we could know God nearly as well as he knows us. And the unknowability means that what we are able to know of God is a great gift. So in verse 17: 'How precious to me are your thoughts, God! And how vast is the sum of them!' And that's what we have here in a way – God's thoughts recorded for us in the Bible.

Allegiance

So now we come to the fourth section – the tricky bit that we've left until the last few minutes. As I've mentioned a few times, I think the psalmist here is declaring his allegiance to God and distancing himself from God's enemies. The language of hatred is confronting, but it's not just hatred for hatred's sake. It's the psalmist's way of saying 'look at my life God, you've seen what I've done and where I've been – I'm on your side, I don't fight for your enemies, I fight for you.' It's about zeal for God, about serving him and being faithful to him. The psalmist has reflected on how God knows his every thought and movement, every fibre of his being. And now he renews his commitment to living a 'holy and pious life.'³ On this passage, the reformer John Calvin writes, 'Our attachment to godliness must be inwardly defective, if it do[es] not generate an abhorrence of sin'.⁴ So our love of God should naturally lead us to opposition of sin and evil.

We could probably all do with a bit more zeal for God. But what this zeal looks like today might be a bit different to what it looked like in ancient Israel. We live in a different culture and we live in a different moment in salvation-history. The redemptive story of the Bible

³ Calvin, Commentary on the Book of Psalms, 222.

⁴ Calvin, Commentary on the Book of Psalms, 222.

continues and now includes Jesus's life, death, and resurrection. And in his famous Sermon on the Mount Jesus said 'love your enemies and pray for those that persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in Heaven' (Matt 5:44-45). We should have zeal for God, we should recoil at evil and injustice, but we should do so in light of Jesus's life and teaching and the hermeneutic of love.

One final note I think remains to be said. And that's on the final lines of the psalm. 'Search me God and know my heart, test me and know my anxious thoughts, see if there is any offensive way in me and lead me in the way everlasting.' The psalmist boldly declares that he is allied to God – in quite strong language. But he doesn't claim to be sinless. Rather he trusts God to be faithful and lead him along the way. Faithfulness is a continual journey of improvement over a life lived with God where we recognise the cosmic interactions we have with God each day. We can declare our allegiance to God and trust that God's knowledge of our lives is right – we aren't sinless but God is faithful and merciful to accept those that serve him and leads them in the way everlasting. Again Jesus brings this into focus as he came to make a way for us to be reconciled to the Father. Jesus has poured out his Spirit on those that believe in him as a deposit, a downpayment and guarantee of the life we have in God. The same Spirit that the psalmist declares to be unescapable, the light that turns night to day, can now live in us and will lead us in the way everlasting.

Let's pray. Father, thank you for your word to us. Thank you for revealing yourself to us. Please help us be more aware of your presence in our lives, aware of how intricately you know us and merciful you are toward us. We praise you for we are fearfully and wonderfully made – you know the movements of our inmost being and we pray that you will be at work in us to love and serve you. See if there is any offensive way in us and lead us in the way everlasting. Amen.