

1. INTRODUCTION – The Transformative Nature of the Psalms

The Psalms tend to galvanize the hard pull of the emotional components of love, grace, complaint, awe and wonder into action. The action is twofold as the Psalmist is moved from his own deliberations of himself and humanity, to contemplating the high nature of his God in relation to himself and humanity. Much of the same raw emotional responses are found in the Prophetic writings, but not with the brevity, directness, and honesty characteristic of the Psalms. The reader is invited to keep pace with the author [King David] on a journey of spiritual contemplation and discovery.

2. TEXT: PSALM 139 – God’s Omnipresence and Omniscience. A Psalm of David, NASB Version

a. The Lord's Discernment of Individuals (139:1-6)

O LORD, You have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
You understand my thought from afar.
You scrutinize my path and my lying down,
And are intimately acquainted with all my ways.
Even before there is a word on my tongue,
Behold, O LORD, You know it all.
You have enclosed me behind and before,
And laid Your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
It is too high, I cannot attain to it.

b. The Lord's Perception of Individuals (139:7-12)

Where can I go from Your Spirit?
Or where can I flee from Your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, You are there;
If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there.
If I take the wings of the dawn,
If I dwell in the remotest part of the sea,
Even there Your hand will lead me,
And Your right hand will lay hold of me.
If I say, “Surely the darkness will overwhelm me,
And the light around me will be night,”
Even the darkness is not dark to You,
And the night is as bright as the day.
Darkness and light are alike to You.

c. The Lord's Purpose for Individuals (139:13-18)

For You formed my inward parts;
You wove me in my mother's womb.
I will give thanks to You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
Wonderful are Your works,
And my soul knows it very well.
My frame was not hidden from You,
When I was made in secret,
And skillfully wrought in the depths of the earth;
Your eyes have seen my unformed substance;
And in Your book were all written
The days that were ordained for me,
When as yet there was not one of them.
How precious also are Your thoughts to me, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!
If I should count them, they would outnumber the sand.
When I awake, I am still with You.

d. David's Prayer for Vindication against the Enemies of God (139:19-22)

O that You would slay the wicked, O God;
Depart from me, therefore, men of bloodshed.
For they speak against You wickedly,
And 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 the utmost hatred;
They have become my enemies.

e. David's Prayer for Personal Relational Purity with God (139:23-24)

Search me, O God, and know my heart;
Try me and know my anxious thoughts;
And see if there be any hurtful way in me,
And lead me in the everlasting way.

- 3. COMMENTARY:** The various components of this psalm expose us to the intensely personal relationship between the psalmist and his God. This psalm defies the canons of genre criticism as in much of the Old Testament God is seen as distant and unapproachable, but here David displays an intensely personal and intimate view of God. Notice how this intimacy plays out in

the following commentary from the Zondervan NIV Bible Commentary:

a. The Lord's Discernment of Individuals (139:1-6)

- i. The Lord "knows" his own. This is a word choice that means complete divine understanding and discernment. In his prayer (vv.23-24), the psalmist asked for the Lord to examine him as in a judicial sense and to declare him to be innocent of all charges. The text seems to presume an ordeal had occurred and that the ordeal is now over, and the psalmist has been justified by the Lord. The psalmist testifies that he knows the Lord is a righteous judge and therefore David is unafraid of Him knowing that the Lord knows him completely.
- ii. The psalmist is not afraid of his judge, for the Judge is more than an arbiter; he is the one in whom the psalmist has found both affection and protection. The knowledge of God referred to here is a knowledge that graciously discerns the favor of those who are loyal to the Lord. By grace humans are blessed. The psalmist exclaims that God's favorable acts toward him are "too wonderful" and "too lofty" for him to properly apprehend... meaning it is beyond the normal inter-human relational intimacy, being an intimacy of a higher order.

b. The Lord's Perception of Individuals (139:7-12)

- i. The "Presence" should be seen in parallel with the "Spirit" of God which, is everywhere. Therefore, God properly perceives and understands all things in all places at all times. Humanity cannot hide from the all-seeing "eye" of the Lord. Unlike pagan deities that are dead and blind, capricious, local and earthbound, the Lord's authority extends to the entirety of creation. David makes this point poetically with "the Heavens" – meaning all of the created universe, and "Sheol" meaning the depths of the grave. He then turns to the spacial divide on earth with "the wings of the Dawn" – meaning the East, and to the "remotest part of the sea" – meaning the far west. Nowhere is God not aware of His beloved.
- ii. The "hand" is seen as a means of comfort as well as offense and defense. Thus, Lord's hand protects his children wherever they may be, even in the "darkness" – of the night or the grave. Since there is only light with God, and His light brightens up the darkness so that the psalmist can say affirmatively, "The night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to You" (v.12).

c. The Lord's Purpose for Individuals (139:13-18)

- i. The psalmist has complete confidence in the Lord's ability to discern the nature and needs of His people, which comes from trust as well as belief in God's purposes. He is the Creator, and His creative concerns include individuals. All of God's "works" are "wonderful," but the believer senses more than any other part of God's creation that he personally is "fearfully and wonderfully made." The believer thus lives with a personal awareness of God's gracious purpose that has chosen him out of all of humanity. The psalmist reveals a unique awareness of God's grace toward him and

responds with thanksgiving.

- ii. Even in the early stages of formation in the womb, the Lord had a purpose for this undeveloped embryo. God's writing "in the book" refers to His knowledge and blessing of His child "all the days" of its life. The psalmist's life was written in The Book of Life, and each of his days was numbered by God. This is not a statement born out of legalistic compulsion or even God's sovereign Will expressed to an individual life within God's Creation. Instead it is an understanding of God's gracious providence expressed personally for the psalmist's benefit. The take-away... *God cares about me...* even when I didn't know Him or properly understand His ways, He loved me and looked out for me.
- iii. The "thoughts" of God are too magnificent, too numerous, and too exalted for a human being to comprehend. However, all our "thoughts" are fully known to the Lord and the Lord's love is real. When awake the psalmist knows that he still enjoys God's presence.

d. Prayer for Vindication (139:19-22)

- i. Overwhelmed as he is with gratitude for God's purpose in himself, the psalmist sees no purpose in the existence of the wicked. The wicked foil God's purposes by their rebellious ways. They are destructive, scheming, and rebellious to the rule of God. The ascription of people being "bloodthirsty" denotes a lack of respect for life and a disregard for justice and righteousness... the things God cares deeply about. The psalmist rightly commits the wicked into God's just hands.
- ii. Wicked acts violate God's standards for life with other people and thus stand in sharp contrast to the divine character. Where God is Good, wickedness is seen as evil. In this sense wickedness is not committed merely against God (as, for instance, is sin-iniquity). Wickedness is sin against others and one's community. Wicked acts are criminal in character, violating the rights of other individuals and threatening the pattern of reciprocity that holds any community together.
- iii. Devotion to the Lord excludes any loyalty to those who hate him and rebel against him. Thus, the psalmist hates, abhors, and shuns the enemies of God. In doing so, he affirms his own devotion to the Lord.

e. David's Prayer for Personal Relational Purity with God (139:23-24)

- i. The psalmist concludes in asking for God to discern his motives and his actions, especially in the context of verses 21-22. This should be seen in the context of Proverbs 16:2 – "All the ways of a man (or individual) are clean in their own sight, but the LORD weighs the motives."
- ii. This prayer likely comes out of a situation where evil people had accused him falsely. Instead of directing himself to his adversaries, he raises up his voice in lament to God, who alone as the righteous Judge can discern his "heart" and "thoughts."
- iii. David desires nothing less than conformity to God's will. He closes by acknowledging that there are only two ways that a person can follow... one leading to destruction

and the other to life and fellowship with God.

4. REFLECTION:

- a. I have long considered David's appreciation of God to have dated back to his youth when as a shepherd alone in the wilderness he came to sense God's Presence. I can imagine David at night looking out into the vast universe that lite up the sky when he was physically most vulnerable yet spiritually most aware of God.
- b. David was a complicated man, and not a perfect man. David wrote in Psalm 25:17-18 "The troubles of my heart are enlarged; bring me out of my distresses. Look upon my affliction and my trouble, and forgive all my sins." **This along with Psalm 51:1-4a** "Be gracious to me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; according to the greatness of Your compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against You, and You only, I have sinned and done what is evil in Your sight." **Both these verses portray David's awareness of his failures, but also his confidence in God for loving him and forgiving him... this is New Covenant Grace that David realized in his Old Covenant environment.**
- c. In the outline of Psalm 139 listed above, there are five parts listed as a, b, c, d and e. In parts a, b and c you get a clear view of David's sense of Awe and Wonder before God from Zondervan's New International Dictionary of Bible Words:
 - i. The word translated as "Awe" meaning: "The awe felt by God's people is an appropriate response to who God is. But awe does not drive us from God. We know that this Majestic One whose Being and Glory are immense and awe-inspiring has chosen to love us and to invite us into the most intimate of relationships with him. When reflecting upon this we need to keep in balance our sense of the tender love of God unveiled in Jesus, and the blinding, overpowering holiness and power that are God's by his very nature."
 - ii. The word translated as "wonder" is placed in the context of the miraculous: "the Bible's stories of the wondrous [miraculous] do not produce faith today in those who are unwilling to accept Scripture's testimony about God and Jesus. It is faith that brings us to Scripture's vision of God, as one who towers above the 'natural law' that to the unconverted seems the ultimate reality. When God is seen as He really is, majestic and outside the realm of the natural produces praise and wonder, this hardly seems strange at all. We do not expect miracles in our daily lives. Nor do the OT and NT report that every generation was given miraculous signs."
 - iii. Those who were captivated by God in all generations experienced the awe and wonder of a Majestic Being so far beyond anything we would call normal that it is impossible not to worship Him as anything but God. Conveying such a view of God is at the heart of all true worship.
- d. The result of David's reflection on parts a, b and c is a clear understanding of God's Grace that necessarily leads David to part e. Scripture teaches that an unclean and impure human cannot long remain before the Perfection that *IS* God. Let me say this again... God

is Perfection. Isaiah saw God in a mystical vision which he recorded in his prophecy [Isaiah 6:1-7].

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook, and the temple was filled with smoke. "Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty." Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for."

- e. **Isaiah knew by being in God's Presence that he "was undone." Interestingly, God didn't argue with Isaiah's assessment, instead God provided the cure Isaiah needed... God purified him. Theologically, this is extremely important. It isn't that God is impacted by our imperfection, but our imperfection cannot long remain before God's Perfection. Put another way. It is not that God can't tolerate our imperfection, but rather our imperfection cannot tolerate God's Perfection. Our desire to remain in God's Presence is admirable but necessarily leads the penitent to a desire for relational purity that only God can bring about... as with the live coal in the text above. In New Testament terms, Jesus is the provision God established to solve humanity's sin problem, and it is the very work of the Indwelling Holy Spirit in our inner-being that Jesus' has rendered to present us sanctified whereby we may remain in God's Presence. Thus, through Grace, God provided that which transforms us from the inside out with the deliberate intention to perfect us and make us capable of remaining in God's Presence forever. It is remarkable that David could land here given the Old Covenant period in which he wrote, and this is attributable to the clarity of his prophetic vision.**