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Psalm 139
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Fearfully and Wonderfully Made

When Karen was pregnant with our first child, we went for an ultrasound to listen for the baby's heart beat. We were surprised when the technician not only let us listen to her heart beat but also video taped Maddy's movement in Karen's womb. At just 20 weeks, we could see her move around, suck her thumb, and even yawn. AND I swear, from her profile, you could also see that Maddy had MY nose.

Suddenly God's hidden work was revealed as he furiously wove Maddy together in the depths of Karen's womb.

David, the author of Psalm 139, didn't have the benefit of an ultrasound when his wife was pregnant. He only knew the mystery of conception, when a baby's frame is formless and hidden, but takes shape over the course of the next 40 weeks, before it is born. Regardless of the science, pregnancy from conception to delivery is a miraculous act of God.

Join me as we read David's reflections on the mystery of life.

1 You have searched me, Lord, and you know me.

2 You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar.

3 You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways.

4 Before a word is on my tongue you, Lord, know it completely.

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

6 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain.

7 Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?

8 If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

9 If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea,

10 even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.

11 If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,"

12 even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.

13 For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb.

14 I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.

15 My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth.

16 Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.

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

18 Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand—when I awake, I am still with you.

19 If only you, God, would slay the wicked! Away from me, you who are bloodthirsty!

20 They speak of you with evil intent; your adversaries misuse your name.

21 Do I not hate those who hate you, Lord, and abhor those who are in rebellion against you?

22 I have nothing but hatred for them, I count them my enemies.

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

24 See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting. Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

This morning as we look at Psalm 139, we will focus primarily on three questions raised by it. How does God know us so intimately? What comfort do we draw from the knowledge that God is always with us? And finally what does it mean to be fearfully and wonderfully made?

So first, how does God know us so intimately? We look at this first section to explore this question. “You have searched me and known me.” The Hebrew root word for searched is chacar. It means to find out, to penetrate, or to examine. The Hebrew root word for know is yada. It means to be aware, as in to be exposed. It’s the same word that is used when upon sinning, Adam and Eve were instantly aware or “knew” that they were naked and exposed.

So right off the bat we get this sense that David is entering into an intimate conversation with God who has searched him and exposed him for what others couldn’t see.

We also see that God even knows our thoughts, before they are even transformed into words on our tongues. God knows them completely.

Sometime Karen will notice that I’m looking a bit pensive and ask... “What are you thinking?” To which, I respond in typical male fashion... “I dunno!” Because I don’t know what is forming in my wee little brain. Can I get an Amen from the men in the room?

We see this same sort of intimate knowledge of other people's thoughts in the New Testament with Jesus. He knew what they were thinking, particularly the religious leaders who were out to get him. He knew their thoughts, their minds, their evil intentions and exposed them when he had opportunity.

The Apostle Paul in speaking to the Corinthians encouraged them to take every thought captive to make it obedient to Christ.¹ So that we don't let slip what we are thinking and make matters worse than what they already are. If God and Jesus know our thoughts before a word is on our tongue then perhaps we should be more careful with what we do let fly from our lips.

We have certainly seen examples from our country's leaders what happens when they are careless with the power of their words. People can lose their lives because of them. God knows it all.

Not only does God know our thoughts, but he knows every little detail of our lives and our daily schedule. Now we may ask, how can the God of the universe be that attentive to every human being on the face of the earth? That is thinking with a human understanding and not with the limitless knowledge of God. We cannot comprehend it. But God is so much more than we can possibly grasp.

When I read this Psalm, I imagine David the shepherd laying in the fields with his flocks by night. Looking up at the stars, and contemplating the vastness of God. Stars upon stars, which we now we know are galaxies upon galaxies.

This summer we began seeing the first images from the James Webb telescope which is so much more powerful than the Hubble Space telescope. We are now able to see not just galaxies, but emerging galaxies and the origins of planets and stars. It's amazing. While it's all new and exciting to us, to God in his infinite knowledge, it's old stuff. God already knows about such things and how they were created.

Not only that, but God also knows about things as small and seeming insignificant as what's going on our own lives. When we stand up or when we sit down. When we go out or when we come back home. There is no place that we can go where we are out of sight or mind of God.

David says, "You are familiar with ALL of my ways." Both the things I want others know and see, and the things I don't want others to know and see. God is familiar with it ALL. Knowing that ourselves is actually good accountability to make sure we don't sin against God, ourselves, others, or creation.

The next part of the psalm expands on this idea that God is always with us. So what comfort do we draw from that knowledge?

There is no place we can go where God is not. God is omnipresent. At every place, at every time, throughout all ages. This is actually one of many

¹ 2 Corinthians 10:5

characteristics that separates God from Satan. Satan is not omnipresent. He can only be at one place at one time, though he can certainly use his influence to tempt us at any moment. But physically, he cannot be every place where we are.

David says, “where can I flee from your presence?”

Up in heaven, you are there.

Down in the depths, you are there. The Hebrew word for depths is Sheol. It literally means the world of the dead, the grave, or Hell. In other words, what he is saying is, “If I create Hell for myself here on earth, then God, you are there.”

It is an interesting idea of God’s presence even being in Hell. I’ve heard it said before the Hell is the absence of God. But David’s words seems to challenge that theology. It also is contrary to what we believe of the Omnipresent character of God.

Take for example Jesus’ parable of the Rich Man and poor Lazarus. Both die. Poor Lazarus goes to heaven while the Rich Man goes to Hell. Lazarus rests next to Abraham completely unaware of the Rich Man’s suffering. Meanwhile, the Rich Man is completely aware of God’s presence with Lazarus.

What this tells us is that no matter how near or far we may roam from God’s presence, there is no place we can go where we are completely out of God’s reach. Even the Hell of my own making. I don’t know exactly what to make of that, but somehow it comforts me to know that Jesus will never leave me or forsake me. Any time, any where, Jesus is always as close as a prayer away.

There are times when we choose to walk in darkness and don’t want to be exposed by Jesus’ light. We’d rather be in darkness. The Good News is that Jesus is even there with us. Sometimes I encourage youth that I am working with, if there is something that you are engaged in that is not good for you or other people and you don’t want anyone else to know about it, just imagine Jesus being right beside you as you are doing it. That will sober you up pretty quickly.

David says, even the darkness cannot hide you because God’s light will penetrate through and expose you for who you really are.

The next part of the psalm is where David dives more deeply into his self image and how he was created. He said, “For you, God, created my in most being, you knit me together my mother’s womb.” The Hebrew word for in most being is kilyoteh which literally means kidneys. Now reading you created my kidneys sounds kind of odd. That’s because the kidneys were considered to be the seat of one’s conscience. Another way to put it is, “I feel it in my gut.”

God created us with a conscience to know the difference between right and wrong. Better yet, with Jesus, God has given us the Holy Spirit as a counselor who provides us with all wisdom of what is true or not.

Notice how David attributes his earliest formation in his mother’s womb to God. “You knit me together,” he says. We get this sense of God being hard at

work in the earliest moments, setting David's DNA, his hair color, his eyes, and his temperament. All of that was set in those very first moments of conception.

Amazing Fun Fact. I have heard it said that a pregnant woman's body is working as hard at rest as it a non pregnant woman's body does while exercising? It is adjusting to many changes going on. Apparently, it takes an enormous amount of energy to knit together this new human in her womb. That is why a pregnant woman is often very tired in those first trimesters.

David says, "I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well."

The Hebrew word for fearfully is *nowroaot*. It comes from the root word *yara* or to fear. We've heard about that a lot recently through the psalms. It means to have a healthy respect. In other words, David is saying, "I have a healthy respect of your having created me."

The Hebrew word for wonderful is *nipleti*. It comes from the root word *palah*. It means to set apart. To have purpose.

I know that full well. The Hebrew words here, *benapsi*, can literally be translated as I know it in my soul.

So if we put it all together, what David is saying is "I have a healthy respect for your having created me. You have set apart, with a purpose. I know it in my soul."

David goes on to say, "My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body."

The Hebrew word for unformed body is *gelemi*. It means unformed, imperfect substance. Interesting before there was ever a scientific understanding of the formation of a human being in the womb, that David knew about fetal development before any form was given to a baby.

I was particularly drawn to the imperfect nature of that unformed substance. Though we are created in the image of a perfect God, none of us are created perfectly. We have flaws, or things that we would change about ourselves if we could. But somehow, our creator chose to weave those flaws and imperfections into our being to make us special, to be set apart for a particular purpose.

"Have you ever noticed the pock-marks, or dimples, covering the surface of a golf ball? They make the ball look imperfect. So, what's their purpose?"

An aeronautical engineer who designs golf balls says that a perfectly smooth ball would travel only 130 yards off the tee. But the same ball with the right kind of dimples will fly twice that far. These apparent "flaws" minimize the ball's air resistance and allow it to travel much further.

Most of us can quickly name the physical characteristics we wish we had been born without. It's difficult to imagine that these "imperfections" are there for a

purpose and are part of God's master design. Yet, when [David] wrote of God's creative marvel in the womb, he said to the Lord, "You formed my inward parts and "Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed (vs. 14). Then he said, "I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made" (v. 14).

If we could accept our bodily "imperfections" as part of God's master plan for us, what a difference it would make in our outlook on life. The "dimples" we dislike may enable us to bring the greatest glory to our wise and loving Creator, who knows how to get the best out of our lives."²

Psalm 139 can be particularly comforting for people who have had to make the very difficult decision at the end of life. David proclaims "All the days ordained for us were written in God's book before one of them came to be." God alone knows the number of our days and holds them in his hands. If that is true, then when a life ends is also in God's hands and not ours. This can help people who have had to end a pregnancy early, remove life supports from someone who is no longer able to survive apart from those supports, or to end someone's suffering with dignity. We can confidently believe that those lives are in God's hands. Not ours.

We are also reminded of the comforting words of the Apostle Paul "There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."³

In closing I want to briefly address this last section of the psalm where David lashes out against his enemies. It seems somewhat out of place. Indeed some commentators believe that it was wrongfully attached to this psalm and should really be part of another psalm, like the Psalm 140 just following. It fits perfectly there. But I think if we look at this psalm as whole, we can see that it seems to be a natural exposition of what David was concealing deep within his heart. He is angry and has hatred toward his enemies and he is seeking vindication by the Lord for feeling this way.

He says, "You have searched me and known me. You know every word before it hits my tongue. There is nothing I can hide from you." Then he just lets it all out. Psalm 139 ends with a confession for David's anxious thoughts and asking God to rid him of anything offensive that is in him.

So there we have Psalm 139. May we know that God knows us intimately and is concerned with every little detail of our lives. May we believe that Jesus will never leave us or forsake us. May we trust that God holds each of our days in the palm of his hands. And may we believe that we are fearfully and wonderfully made, imperfections and all. Amen!

² Jimmy Karuniadi, Our Daily Bread (5-27-99) from Preaching Today Website at <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2000/april/12387.html>

³ Romans 8:1