

Psalm 139

- lead me in the way everlasting -

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Introduction

- ❖ Psalm 139 is an interesting Psalm in this time of Social Media and the big Internet Companies, who know very much of their users and are almost everywhere accessible.
- ❖ Psalm 139 is also relevant for Christians who live in countries, where the government wants to track its citizens everywhere and keeps a record of their (online) behaviour.
- ❖ But, first of all, we need to appreciate this beautiful psalm, expressing thoughts, which are so wonderful.
 - “Any small thoughts that we may have of God are magnificently transcended by this psalm; yet for all its height and depth it remains intensely personal from first to last.”¹
- ❖ The Psalm speaks of God’s omniscience, his omnipresence, his proximity and intimacy, his personal care in the creation and formation of the individual, and every of our lifetime has been written in his book.
- ❖ There is also a tension in this Psalm. The author is threatened by wicked and bloodthirsty men. How does his situation relate to the omnipresence of the Lord?
 - There are also many pastoral questions to be asked.
Where was God when I needed him most?
Where was God when I cried out to him for help?
 - How does the hatred of the author relate to the “love your enemies”, which Jesus taught (Mt 5:43, 44)?
- ❖ This Psalm teaches the believer, not to be silent about his or her anxieties and pain.
- ❖ In the end, the author prays: “lead me in the way everlasting,” which is equal to: “walk with the Lord” and to: “live in communion with God (Jn 17:3).

¹ Kidner, D. (1975, Vol. 16, p. 500).

- ❖ The context, form and structure, theological, technical and hermeneutical notes given in this sermon outline overlap with other sermon outlines taken from the Book of Psalms. This makes it possible to use this sermon outline as a “stand-alone”. You can also fit this outline into a series of sermons.

Context

- ❖ The historical context of Psalm 139 is not known. The only inference to personal circumstances is found in verse 19-22, where the poet points to the wicked, who are the enemies of God and his enemies.
- ❖ The Book of Psalms belongs to the Wisdom literature. Psalm 139 is part of the fifth book of Psalms (Psalm 107-150).

Form and structure

- ❖ Psalm 139 is beautifully construed. the Psalm 139 consists of two parts and four stanzas.²
 - The first part (verse 1-18) acclaims God’s sovereignty, his knowledge and his wonderful works. There are three stanzas, addressing three themes:
 - God’s Personal Knowledge;
 - God’s Personal Presence;
 - God’s Personal Care.
 - The second part (verse19-24) consists of one stanza.
- ❖ Each of the four stanzas consists of two parts, **one of four verses**, and **one of two verses**. See below.

<i>Superscript:</i>	For the director of music. Of David. A Psalm.
Part 1 (verse 1-18). Acclamation and Praises.	

² Stanza. (2018, July 27). Retrieved from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stanza>

<p><i>God's Personal Knowledge (verse 1-6)</i></p>	<p>1 O LORD, you have searched me and you know me.</p> <p>2 You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar.</p> <p>3 You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways.</p> <p>4 Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD.</p>
<p><i>God's Personal Presence (verse 7-12)</i></p>	<p>5 You hem me in—behind and before; you have laid your hand upon me.</p> <p>6 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain.</p> <p>7 Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?</p> <p>8 If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.</p> <p>9 If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea,</p> <p>10 even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.</p> <p>11 If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,"</p> <p>12 even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.</p>

<p><i>God's Personal Care (verse 13-18)</i></p>	<p>13 For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb.</p> <p>14 I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.</p> <p>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,</p> <p>16 your eyes saw my unformed body.</p> <p>All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.</p>
	<p>17 How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!</p> <p>18 Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand.</p> <p>When I awake, I am still with you.</p>
<p>Part 2 (verse 19-24). Prayer request.</p>	
<p><i>Personal outcry and prayer request (verse 19-24)</i></p>	<p>19 If only you would slay the wicked, O God! Away from me, you bloodthirsty men!</p> <p>20 They speak of you with evil intent; your adversaries misuse your name.</p> <p>21 Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD, and abhor those who rise up against you?</p> <p>22 I have nothing but hatred for them; I count them my enemies.</p>
	<p>23 Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts.</p> <p>24 See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.</p>

Technical, hermeneutical and historical notes

Remark

- ❖ Some difficulties with regard to the translation of the Hebrew text will not be addressed.

Parallellismus membrorum

- ❖ Parallellismus membrorum is a special feature of Biblical literature, especially of the Old Testament Wisdom Literature, i.e. The Book of Job, Psalms and Proverbs. It “is also present, although less prominent, in biblical prose. It can be defined as the repetition of the same or related semantic content and/or grammatical structure in consecutive lines or verses.”³ It is very helpful to discover the beauty and the wisdom of the Psalms.
- ❖ There are three kinds of parallelism:
 - Synonymous parallelism.
 - Two (three) lines express the same thought. Verse 13 is an example:
 - For you created my inmost being;
 - you knit me together in my mother’s womb.
 - The two lines can complement each other, such as the lines of verse 9:
 - If I rise on the wings of the dawn, (The East)
 - if I settle on the far side of the sea, (The West)
 - Syntactical parallelism
 - The third and the fourth line complete the first two lines (verse 9, 10):
 1. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, (verse 9)
 2. if I settle on the far side of the sea,
 3. even there your hand will guide me, (verse 10)
 4. your right hand will hold me fast.
 - A special case is “the concluding form” (verse 14):
 - I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
 - your works are wonderful,
 - I know that full well.
 - Antithetical parallelism
 - An example is found in Psalm 139:24:

³ See for more information: Berlin, A. (1992). *Parallelism*. In D. N. Freedman (Ed.)(Vol. 5, p. 155).

- See if there is any offensive way in me,
- and lead me in the way everlasting.

Chiasm

- ❖ A chiasm is also found in this Psalm. This means that the same thought is repeated but in reversed order (verse 15, 16):
 - My frame was not hidden from you (A)
 - when I was made in the secret place. (B)
 - When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, (B)
 - your eyes saw my unformed body. (A)

Verse 1, 23

- ❖ to search = “חַקֵּר”: to **explore, search out; to question somebody (about his basic convictions)**.⁴
 - In verse 1, the verb is used in the perfect tense.
 - In verse 23, the verb is used in the imperative mode.
- ❖ To know = “יָדַע”: **2 b**); of God’s *knowing* persons, etc., thoroughly; knowing the heart.⁵

Exposition

Preliminary Remarks

- ❖ The Psalm refers to the LORD, the NAME of God, which he has made known to Moses (Ex 3:13, 14) and in Jesus Chris. “I AM” (present).
- ❖ The key to the right understanding of this Psalm is found in verse 23:
 - Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and **know my anxious thoughts**.
 - These **anxious thoughts** have led the author to his personal outcry of verse 18-22.
 - He is endangered and threatened by bloodthirsty men who abuse the name of the LORD. They are the enemies of the LORD and his enemies.
 - These anxious thoughts also gave rise to the statement of faith and the praise of God’s wonderful works in the first part.

⁴ Koehler, L., Baumgartner, W., Richardson, M. E. J., & Stamm, J. J. (1994–2000, p. 348).

⁵ Brown, F., Driver, S. R., & Briggs, C. A. (1977, p. 394).

- The Psalm begins with a statement of faith trusting God’s Personal Knowledge, his Personal Presence and the Personal Care, which is followed by this outcry due to anxieties, which gave rise to his personal prayer. This has been visualised below.



Verse 1a

- ❖ **“Of David.”** This doesn’t imply that King David was the original author, which is possible but not conclusive. It can also mean: this Psalm belongs to the collection of David.

Part 1 (verse 1b-18)

Verse 1b-6 God’s Personal Knowledge (first stanza) - omniscience

- ❖ Verse 1-4
 - **“You searched me.”** Searching means probing the thoughts and feelings, the motives and **the integrity** of the author.
 - Jesus searched the motives of the Pharisees when he said: “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean” (Mt 23:25, 26).
 - The author is not afraid that God noticed any sinful thoughts and feelings. He knows the LORD, his God. Compare Psalm 103:
 - “**The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.** He will not always accuse, nor will he harbour his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.

For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his love for those who fear him;
as far as the east is from the west,
so far has he removed our transgressions from us.

As a father has compassion on his children,
so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him;
for he knows how we are formed,
he remembers that we are dust” (Ps 103:8-14).

- **“You perceive my thoughts from afar.”**
 - **“Perceive”** = “כִּי־יָרֵא”: 2. to **pay attention to**, to **consider**, to *think about* (Dt 32:29; Ps 73:17; Ps 139:2).⁶
 - It is important to notice that God is not taking over and controlling our thoughts. He has created us as individuals and responsible beings. He is watching us like a father or mother who is watching his child. A father might wonder, what his child might be thinking but God knows.
 - **“You discern my going out and my lying down.”**
 - **“Discern”** = “יָדַע־לִי”: **know**, discern, formally, measure off, gauge, i.e., **have clear knowledge of a person.**⁷
 - **“you are familiar with all my ways.”**
 - **“Way”** = “דֶּרֶךְ־יָדַע־לִי”: **manner, custom, behaviour.**⁸ The Lord is familiar with your lifestyle, and your circumstances. *“You are familiar* with suggests the psalmist welcomes this knowledge.”⁹
- ❖ This knowledge is personal knowledge, not rational but empathetic knowledge like a husband knows his wife, a girl-friend her boyfriend. It is knowledge based on love.
- ❖ Verse 5, 6
- **“You hem me in.”** The LORD is a God of proximity and intimacy. But also a God, whom I cannot escape (see verse 7-12).
 - **“Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain.”**

⁶ Koehler, L., Baumgartner, W., Richardson, M. E. J., & Stamm, J. J. (1994–2000, p. 122).

⁷ Swanson, J. (1997).

⁸ Koehler, L., Baumgartner, W., Richardson, M. E. J., & Stamm, J. J. (1994–2000, p. 232).

⁹ Waltke, B. K., Houston, J. M., & Moore, E. (2010, p. 548).

- “The Lord discerns the actions of his own (verse 1), whether they sit or stand (verse 2; see Ps 1:6). This discernment belongs uniquely to God, who alone is the Judge of all flesh. Hence the psalmist exclaims that this divine prerogative is beyond him: ‘Such knowledge is too wonderful for me.’”¹⁰

Verse 7-12 *God’s Personal Presence (second stanza) - omnipresence*

❖ Verse 7-10

- **“Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?”** The answer will be a simple nowhere.
- **“If I go up to the heavens, you are there.”** The writer used vivid imagery. Man cannot go up to the heavens, but he can still climb a high mountain. God will be there.
- **“if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.”** He used the Hebrew word which is also used for the realm of the dead. The writer doesn’t want to die but again he used vivid imagery when he wants to take his refuge into a deep cave, deep into the earth.
- **“If I rise on the wings of the dawn.”** Rise up early in the morning. The sun has not risen yet, a new day is dawning. Look at the east. The orange colours are like wings spreading over the horizon.
- **“If I settle on the far side of the sea.”** The sea is west of Israel. The prophet Jonah wanted to travel to the far west to flee the presence of God. He could not (Jonah 1:1-17).
- **“Even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.”**
 - **“For I am the LORD, your God, who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear; I will help you”** (Isa 41:13).

❖ Verse 11, 12

- **“If I say, “Surely the darkness will hide me ... the night will shine like the day,...”** In those days it could be pretty dark during the nights.

Verse 13-18 *God’s Personal Care (third stanza)*

❖ Verse 13-16

- In this part of the Psalm, we get to know God as Father, here with tender motherly care, although weaving and embroidery were done by man.

¹⁰ VanGemeren, W. A. (2008, Vol. 5, p. 960).

- “The stanza represents God as a skilful weaver of embroidered cloth dedicated to creating his magnum opus. His studio is the dark chamber of a mother’s womb.”¹¹
 - **“For you created my inmost being.”** The “inmost being” refers to the kidneys, the seat of feelings like anxiety (verse 24).
 - **“The secret place”** and **“the depths of the earth”** are images for the womb of the mother, hidden from the sight of ordinary people, God was at work. God’s eyes were upon him.
 - He is looking at the past of his creation and also to the future. Every day has been counted by God and been written in his book.
 - Job said (Job 10:9-12):
 - “Remember that you moulded me like clay.
 - Will you now turn me to dust again?
 - Did you not pour me out like milk
 - and curdle me like cheese,
 - clothe me with skin and flesh
 - and knit me together with bones and sinews?
 - You gave me life and showed me kindness,
 - and in your providence watched over my spirit.
- ❖ Verse 17, 18
 - The author bursts out in praises and in confidence. **“When I awake, I am still with you.”**

Part 2 (verse 19-24)

Verse 19-24 anxieties and personal prayer (fourth stanza)

- ❖ Verse 19-22
 - The author is threatened by enemies, who are bloodthirsty, abusing the name of the Lord and speak against the Lord.
 - **“Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD?”** Compare this with the words of Jesus.
 - “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: **Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you**” (Mt 5:43, 44).
 - Does Jesus contradict Psalm 139?

During the days of Jesus, the Pharisees taught the people: “Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.” The enemy were the Romans, and their neighbours the fellow-Jews. In the Old Testament, there is not such a command found to hate your enemy.

¹¹ Waltke, B. K., Houston, J. M., & Moore, E. (2010, p. 557).

Although it is not stated explicitly, the Pharisees might have quoted Psalm 139:21, 22 to support their argument or use it as an example.

If that was the case, it was not taken into account that the author was speaking about his anxieties, and cried out for help to lead him in the way everlasting.

When applied to the words of Jesus, his word to love your enemies is part of the way everlasting.

- Tension (see above):
 - When God is everywhere, in the heavens above, the earth beneath, the east and the west, one might ask why he did allow the wicked to approach and threaten the author, and to speak evil words of God?
- Why does this Psalm express such a hatred?
 - Firstly, the Psalm shows us a “natural” response. The author really feels anger, resistance, and hatred. He wants to defend the honour and glory of the NAME of the LORD.
 - Secondly, the Psalm teaches us to give air to these feelings. Otherwise, we will resemble a pressure-cooker, and if the steam will not be released, the cooker might explode with much damage.
 - Thirdly, the Psalm explains that while giving air to these feelings and anxieties, there will be room for prayer to God.
- ❖ Verse 23-24
 - Because of the preceding verses (1-22) about God’s personal knowledge, presence, care, and the present situation being threatened, the author concludes this beautiful Psalm with prayer: search me, know me, test me, lead me in the way everlasting.
 - “Everlasting” has in the Old Testament not the meaning of “eternal life”, but longevity. Longevity is a gift from God. The whole Psalm speaks of “living in communion with God.” This is in the New Testament the essence of “eternal life” (Jn 17:3).
“The *everlasting* way is God’s way, the one he has set out for all time as the way his people should go.”¹²

Application

Remarks

- ❖ “Psalm 139 has both head and heart. It is strongly theological, dealing with such important doctrines as God’s omniscience (it is probably the weightiest part of the Bible for discussing

¹² Bratcher, R. G., & Reyrburn, W. D. (1991, p. 1113).

God's omniscience), omnipresence, and omnipotence; but it is also wonderfully personal, because it speaks of these attributes of God in ways that impact the psalmist and ourselves."¹³

- It is beyond the power of our comprehension.
- ❖ Please pay special attention to pastoral care, if needed!
 - Does God really know everything, also about my past and present, which I would like to leave behind me and forget all about it?
 - Where was God, when I was abused, when I suffered, when I lost my son or daughter?
 - Did God make a mistake, when I had a miscarriage?
More questions can be asked.
 - These questions can be addressed by looking at verse 23 and 24, which speak about the anxieties, and deep emotional feelings, like fear and hatred.
- ❖ Praise God because of his personal knowledge of all your ways.
- ❖ Praise God because of his personal presence, wherever you are.
- ❖ Praise God because of his personal care, all your days have been counted.
 - Remember Matthew 28:20: "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."
 - Praise God, because he has formed you in the womb.
- ❖ Compare this Psalm with the world of the Social Media. They know a lot about you and the Internet is almost everywhere available.

Verse 1b-6 God's Personal Knowledge

- ❖ "For an unsaved person this powerful, pervasive knowledge seems intrusive and frightening, and with good reason. God is the end-time judge with whom we must reckon. Strikingly, the response of the psalmist is not fear. He is not trembling when he thinks of God's omniscience. On the contrary, he shelters himself in God's knowledge and marvels at it. For the psalmist, God's knowledge is not a threat; it is a refuge."¹⁴
 - If we think that we can hide our sinful thoughts and feelings from God as we can from other people then we delude ourselves. "An all-knowing God is immensely threatening, which is why we try to banish him from our minds."¹⁵
 - This Psalm is a warning against any form of hypocrisy.
- ❖ This Psalm stresses the importance of integrity as a believer.

¹³ Boice, J. M. (2005, p. 1201).

¹⁴ Boice, J. M. (2005, p. 1204).

¹⁵ Boice, J. M. (2005, p. 1204).

Verse 7-12 *God's Personal Presence*

- ❖ It is comforting to know that God sees you. Hagar, Sermon on the Mount.
 - “For this is what the high and lofty One says— he who lives forever, whose name is holy: “I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite” (Isa 57:15).

Verse 13-18 *God's Personal Care*

- ❖ Remember the love of God, which he has shown in the past and shows in the present.
- ❖ Although the main thrust of this Psalm is not to address specific ethical problems, it might be helpful to address the following ethical problems **prudently**:
 - Abortion – “For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb” (verse 13).
 - Euthanasia – “your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be” (verse 16).”

Verse 19-26 *Prayer*

- ❖ Enemies
 - Jesus:
“When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed” (1 Pet 2:23, 24).
- ❖ Eternal way
 - “To walk with God” (Gen 17: 1; Dt 5:23; a.o.).
 - “And after he became the father of Methuselah, Enoch walked with God 300 years and had other sons and daughters. Altogether, Enoch lived 365 years. **Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him away**” (Gen 5:22-24).
 - “By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death; he could not be found, because God had taken him away. For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God. And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him” (Heb 11:5, 6).
 - “May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer” (Ps 19:14).

Psalm 139 for children (and adults)

- ❖ Psalm 139 can be explained to children and adults by making movements. Some examples:

Psalm 139	Movement
You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar.	Sit on and rise from a chair Put the two hands next to your head
Before a word is on my tongue	Put a finger on your lips
You hem me in—behind and before; you have laid your hand upon me.	Put a hand on the back and on the breast Put to hands on the shoulders
If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.	Lift one arm and finger up to the sky Point one arm and finger to the ground
	BE CREATIVE

Quotation

- ❖ “Happy the Christian who prays thus every day! Who puts himself into the presence of the all-seeing God, who stands in his light, and is willing to have anything and everything which is not right brought to light and judged. This is the true walk “in the light.” Even the thoughts must be so dealt with. In the New Testament it is expressed in this wise, “bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5). Then there is the willingness to put away anything which is grievous to God and to his Spirit and to be led in the way everlasting (Arno Gaebelin, *The Book of Psalms*, p. 484-485).¹⁶

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¹⁶ Boice, J. M. (2005, p . 1212).

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