

Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs: The Master Musician's Melodies

Bereans Adult Bible Fellowship
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Psalm 139 — Neither Wings of Light nor Cloak of Night Can Separate Me from God

1.0 Introducing Psalm 139

- Ibn Ezra (Jewish rabbi in the Middle Ages) declared that Psalm 139 is the crown of all the Psalms, being unequalled in the five books of the Psalter.
- Psalm 139 is the second of the Psalter's last eight psalms by David (Pss 138–145).
- Compare Psalm 138:6 with 139:2 and 138:7 with 139:10.
- David's intimate relationship to God reveals his complete trust in the God who is everywhere, is all-knowing, is all-powerful, and who created him in his mother's womb.
- "How can a God so immense be so immanent? Such is the mind-boggling yet soul-comforting reality about our infinite yet intimate God." — Steven J. Lawson, *Psalms 76–150*, Holman Old Testament Commentary (Nashville: Holman Reference, 2006), 333.

2.0 Reading Psalm 139 (NAU)

139:1 A Psalm of David.

O LORD, You have searched me and known *me*.

139:2 You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
You understand my thought from afar.

139:3 You scrutinize my path and my lying down,
And are intimately acquainted with all my ways.

139:4 Even before there is a word on my tongue,
Behold, O LORD, You know it all.

139:5 You have enclosed me behind and before,
And laid Your hand upon me.

139:6 *Such* knowledge is too wonderful for me;
It is *too* high, I cannot attain to it.

- 139:7** Where can I go from Your Spirit?
Or where can I flee from Your presence?
- 139:8** If I ascend to heaven, You are there;
If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there.
- 139:9** If I take the wings of the dawn,
If I dwell in the remotest part of the sea,
- 139:10** Even there Your hand will lead me,
And Your right hand will lay hold of me.
- 139:11** If I say, "Surely the darkness will overwhelm me,
And the light around me will be night,"
- 139:12** Even the darkness is not dark to You,
And the night is as bright as the day.
Darkness and light are alike *to You*.
- 139:13** For You formed my inward parts;
You wove me in my mother's womb.
- 139:14** I will give thanks to You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
Wonderful are Your works,
And my soul knows it very well.
- 139:15** My frame was not hidden from You,
When I was made in secret,
And skillfully wrought in the depths of the earth;
- 139:16** 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.
- 139:17** How precious also are Your thoughts to me, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!
- 139:18** If I should count them, they would outnumber the sand.
When I awake, I am still with You.
- 139:19** O that You would slay the wicked, O God;
Depart from me, therefore, men of bloodshed.
- 139:20** For they speak against You wickedly,
And Your enemies take *Your name* in vain.
- 139:21** Do I not hate those who hate You, O LORD?
And do I not loathe those who rise up against You?
- 139:22** I hate them with the utmost hatred;
They have become my enemies.
- 139:23** **Search me, O God, and know my heart;
Try me and know my anxious thoughts;**
- 139:24** And see if there be any hurtful way in me,
And lead me in the everlasting way.
- For the choir director.



3.0 Understanding Psalm 139

3.1 Outline



- I. Deeds I Used to Do, I No Longer Do (vv. 1–6)
- II. Places I Used to Go, I No Longer Go (vv. 7–12)
- III. Thoughts I Used to Think, I No Longer Think (vv. 13–18)
- IV. Companions I Used to Have, I No Longer Have (vv. 19–24)

Each of the 4 sections of the psalm include 4 verses of description and 2 verses of reflection (vv. 1–4 and 5–6; vv. 7–10 and 11–12; vv. 13–16 and 17–18; vv. 19–22 and 23–24).

3.2 Notes

- **v. 1** “You have searched me and known *me*”
 - “Why would someone speak of Yhwh’s knowing everything about them? Jeremiah does so when under attack from people, in the conviction that Yhwh knows he is faithful and will therefore act against his attackers (Jer. 11:20; 12:3). Psalm 17:3 speaks in similar terms of a confidence that Yhwh will find the suppliant truly committed, which is part of the basis for an appeal for Yhwh’s deliverance from attackers (cf. 26:2–3; 44:21).” — John Goldingay, *Psalms: Volume 3, Psalms 90–150*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 629.
 - See Psalms 11:4–5; Job 7:17–18; Jeremiah 17:9–10.
 - Writers use this same language elsewhere in Scripture in pleas of innocence, confession of sin, and as an expression of trust (cp. Pss 44:20–21; 69:5; 142:3).
- **v. 2** “You know”
 - Emphatic personal pronoun: “You, yes, You” or “You alone.”
 - The same construction occurs again in verse 13.
- **vv. 2–4** Divine Omniscience
 - God knows the psalmist’s thoughts, ways, and words.
 - “Omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence are often used as expository language for the three sections of part one [vv. 1–18]. But it must be done with care lest this conceptualization becomes a knowing about God without a being known, accompanied, created, and sustained by God.” — James Luther Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), 427.
- **v. 3** “scrutinize”
 - Literally, “winnow” or “sift.” God can discern between the wheat and chaff in our lives.
- **v. 6** “It is *too* high, I cannot attain to it”
 - “What he is saying is this: ‘I thank you that I have a Master whom I cannot comprehend.’ . . . What he is speaking of here is God’s

omnipresence; and he is showing that this is the very thing that he does not understand, namely, how God is present everywhere.” — Chrysostom, “Against the Anomoeans,” 1.24–25, cited in Quentin F. Wesselschmidt, ed., *Psalms 51–150*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture 8 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 385.

- **vv. 7–10** Divine Omnipresence
 - David is not really attempting to flee from God. He does not fear God’s presence—he finds comfort in knowing that God knows everything about him and is everywhere he goes.
 - Some, however, rightly fear a God who is omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent.
 - Compare Proverbs 15:11; Jeremiah 23:24; Amos 9:2–4; Obadiah 4; and Hebrews 4:12–13.
- **v. 9** “take the wings of the dawn”
 - “Though one should fly with the speed of light, he could find no recess where he would be beyond the reach of divine power.” — John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 5 vols. (reprint; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948–49), 5:212.
 - Even moving at the speed of light to a far corner of the universe, the believer never leaves the perception, presence, power, or provision of God. God never leads where He cannot keep.
- **v. 12** “Darkness and light”
 - See Job 34:22 and John 3:19–21.
- **vv. 13–16** How do these verses relate to abortion?
 - David is not talking about abortion, but the truths in these verses have everything to do with how a believer ought to view abortion.
 - Compare Job 10:8–12.
- **v. 13** “You formed my inward parts”
 - Even in David’s time, people could no longer identify clearly with the deliverance of Israel out of Egypt and their preservation in the wilderness. But, just as all of us today, they could identify with the wonder of birth.
 - No wonder God knows me—He made me!
- **v. 14** “I am fearfully and wonderfully made”
 - Literally, “for I am fearfully wonderful.” The concise language demonstrates the emphatic declaration of wonder.
- **v. 16** “all”
 - Literally, “all of them.” The psalmist refers either to all the parts of the fetus as it is being formed in the womb or to the “days” in the next part of the verse.



- ✓ Since “my unformed substance” (“my *golem*”) is singular and since “days” is placed first in the second half of the verse, the most likely antecedent is “days.”
- ✓ God knows all of our days (their beginning, their number, their end, and their accomplishments)—He knew them even at the time of our conception and development within our mother’s womb.

- **v. 17** “to me”

- Better translated as “As for me” and placed at the beginning of the verse (where it occurs in the Hebrew for emphasis).

- **v. 18** “When I awake”

- According to one commentator, the psalmist falls asleep counting God’s thoughts concerning him. When he wakes up, he is still totally absorbed in his contemplation of God. — Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Psalms*, 3 vols., trans. by Francis Bolton, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament*, F. Delitzsch and C. F. Keil (reprint; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1968), 3:352.
- Whether the psalmist is asleep or awake, his thoughts are occupied with his great God, his Creator, his Judge.



- **vv. 19–22** Final Thoughts

- “[I]n the thought world of the psalms, this section is not incoherent at all, no more, for instance, than the wish for the elimination of the wicked at the end of Psalm 104 or the references to the enemies in the midst of Psalm 23’s calm expression of trust.” — Mays, *Psalms*, 428.
- See Psalm 101 for the same basic message of identification with the Lord rather than with the unrighteous.
- It is staggering to realize that some people actually hate such a wonderful and marvelous God.

- **v. 22** “I hate them with the utmost hatred”

- The rhetorical question in verse 21 is another way of making this same declaration with equal force.
- Read Ephesians 5:1–21 in the light of Psalm 139.

- **vv. 23–24** Back to the Beginning

- Verses 1 and 23 form an *inclusio* enwrapping the entire psalm.
- The psalmist directs his last words at himself, not at his enemies and God’s enemies. He prays that God would examine his thoughts and motives. He wants nothing in common with God’s enemies—whether in thought or in deed.
 - ✓ “As I hate the wicked in their way, so would I hate every wicked way in myself.” — C. H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*, 3 vols. (reprint; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, n.d.), 3/2:266.
- He prays for God to lead him “in the everlasting way” (a phrase found only here in the Bible).
 - ✓ It is the “everlasting way” because it will not be brought to an end. In contrast, the way of the wicked will come to a disastrous end.

4.0 Singing Psalm 139

“Lord, All I Am Is Known to Thee”

(Tune: “Blessed Be the Name”)

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| <p>1 Lord, all I am is known to Thee:
In vain my soul would try
To shun Thy presence, or to flee
The notice of Thine eye.</p> <p>3 My thoughts lie open to Thee, Lord,
Before they’re formed within;
And ere my lips pronounce the word,
Thou knowest the sense I mean.</p> <p>5 So let Thy grace surround me still,
And like a bulwark prove,
To guard my soul from every ill,
Secured by sovereign love.</p> | <p>2 Thy all surrounding sight surveys
My rising and my rest,
My public walks, my private ways,
The secrets of my breast.</p> <p>4 O wondrous knowledge! deep and high:
Where can a creature hide?
Within Thy circling arms I lie,
Beset on every side.</p> |
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— Words: Isaac Watts (*The Psalms of David*, 1719)

“Lord, Thou Hast Searched Me”

(Tune: “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross”)

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|---|--|
| <p>1 Lord, Thou hast searched me and dost know
Where’er I rest, where’er I go;
Thou knowest all that I have planned,
And all my ways are in Thy hand.</p> <p>3 Where can I go apart from Thee,
Or whither from Thy presence flee?
In Heav’n? It is Thy dwelling fair;
In death’s abode? Lo, Thou art there.</p> <p>5 If deepest darkness cover me,
The darkness hideth not from Thee;
To Thee both night and day are bright,
The darkness shineth as the light.</p> | <p>2 My words from Thee I cannot hide,
I feel Thy power on every side;
O wondrous knowledge, awful might,
Unfathomed depth, unmeasured height.</p> <p>4 If I the wings of morning take,
And far away my dwelling make,
The hand that leadeth me is Thine,
And my support Thy power divine.</p> |
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— Words: Author unknown (Paraphrase of Ps 139)

5.0 Praying Psalm 139

- Thank You, Lord, for knowing all I do, think, and say. [vv. 1–6]
- Father, You never leave me nor forsake me. [vv. 7–12]
- How precious You are because of Your work in me, O God. [vv. 13–18]
- Keep me from thinking or doing anything contrary to You, Father. [vv. 19–24]

6.0 Applying Psalm 139

- The greatest of all comforts is to know that God knows and is there.
- No wonder God knows me—He made me!
- The closer we grow to God, the greater our distance from sin and the wicked.