

PSALM 139

As you study this beautiful psalm, you'll see many of the classic "tools" of Hebrew poetry being used. For instance, throughout the passage you'll notice David "rhyming" *ideas* rather than *sounds*. He does this by using synonyms (in connected phrases or lines) to emphasize and enrich meaning. You'll also observe his use of poetic *opposites* usually indicating all-inclusiveness (as we would use the phrases "from A to Z" or "the rich and poor alike").

During your time is this passage remember that behind the insight and artistry of David (who was called "the sweet singer of Israel") a far greater Communicator is at work. In these verses, *His* heart and mind are revealed. Ask Him to bless and direct your study.

Read Psalm 139 through then re-read verses 1-6. The NIV is in bold print below (with some literal meanings, other translations, synonyms, etc. noted as well).

- 1 **O LORD, You have searched** [*penetrated, ransacked*] **me**
and You [*alone*] **know me.** [*ya-da' — most intimate knowledge*]
- 2 **You know** [*ya-da'*] **when I sit and when I rise;**
You perceive [*za-rah'; lit. to separate*] **my thoughts** [*root: graze, feed upon*] **from afar.**
[*before I think them*]
- 3 **You discern** [*lit. toss, winnow*] **my going out and my lying down;**
You are familiar [*za-rah'*] **with all my ways.** [*lit. trodden-down paths; worn from usage*]
- 4 **Before a word is on my tongue You know it completely,** [*altogether, perfectly*] **O LORD.**
- 5 **You hem me in** [*root: to cramp, confine; translated as besiege, enclose*] **behind and before;**
You have laid Your hand upon me. [*handled; hand placed for sovereign control*]
- 6 **Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain.**

1. What are some ways we might react to the truth of verse 1?

2. Write down what the poetic words of verses 2-4 teach you about the way God knows you.

Verse 5 shows God's scrutiny and knowledge are inescapable and complete; we're securely held before His all-seeing eyes. "Behind and before" includes the idea of time; past, present, future.

3. No one else knows us like this, aware of every “what” and “why” of our lives. Reading verse 6, how do you think God’s knowledge of us compares with our understanding of ourselves?

Verses 7-12. Note: verse 10 has God’s “inescapable supervision” in view. (NIV Study Bible note.)

4. What information does David now add in verse 7?

5. As you read through verses 8-12:
 - a. What do you see implied about humanity?

- b. What is said about God?

Verses 13-18. Now David takes us further—note the word “for” in verse 13.

6. What does the psalmist go on to explain in verse 13—what dark, secret place and what basic process are being described?

7. Notice the first line of verse 14. What are some of the wonders and marvels that come to your mind as you consider the awesome human body in general?

From this psalm’s opening lines the writer has been circling in closer and closer on the full truth of Almighty God’s connection with each one of us. Now we’re brought to the heart of the matter.

8. Verses 13-18 are David’s words but they are also God’s word *to, for, and about* you. Take time to thoughtfully consider each line; write down your personal observations.
verse 13

verse 14

verse 15

verse 16

verses 17-18. Note: verse 17 can be read *How precious to me and How precious concerning me.*

In our fallen world (where Jesus told us clearly we'll have tribulation and suffering) it's crucial to understand the immense power and truth behind the words "*Your works are wonderful*" (verse 14). In all things that concern each one of us, He is mighty, wise, just and loving beyond all comprehension. When the full weight of all His goodness and care for us is finally, fully revealed, eternity will not be long enough to give Him the praise that fills our hearts.

A further inescapable message comes through in these verses: there is absolutely no room for anyone to think of their existence—or anyone else's—as an insignificant, unnoticed, random biological event. (See also Genesis 1:26-27, Psalm 8:5-9.)

Enjoy these comments from David Roper's e-musings:

...it should not concern us at all that people do not know us—but for some, a retiring nature is grounded in a deep dislike for oneself: "I'm someone to be kept out of sight." Perhaps you're like that, wondering why God ever made you, longing to be someone else. But is it not better to be what God has chosen to make you? "For to have been thought about—born in God's thoughts—and then made by God, is the dearest, grandest, most precious thing in all thinking, is it not?" (George MacDonald)

David elaborates the same thought in the 139th Psalm, describing himself en utero as God's special creation, pondering "this awesome being that is me!" ...Do you realize that you have been thought about and made by God? You are one of a kind, woven together according to a divine template, intricately "embroidered" in your mother's womb, a creation that has no parallel in the universe. "How is it that you came to be you? God thought about you and so you grew."

Long before you were born, you existed in God's thoughts. Long before your parents loved or neglected you, your peers admired or rejected you, your teachers, colleagues and employers encouraged or disheartened you, you were known and loved by Love itself. God saw you and took delight in you. He gazed at what He had made and was glad. He loved it and said "It is good!"

9. Think back through what you have learned in this section. As you truly begin to accept and count upon these truths how might that affect you this week:
- a. in your thoughts and actions?

 - b. in your response to others?

From marveling at God's greatness and the worth He places on each individual perhaps King David now considers what he sees going on in all Israel and its neighboring kingdoms.

10. In verses 19-22, David's emotions blaze out! How do the wicked act toward others (usually the weak, defenseless, and the righteous)?
11. How do the wicked—some posing as religious folks—act in relation to their great Creator? (verses 20-21)

In all honesty, can you at times relate to some of David's feelings here? Derek Kidner says, *"For all its vehemence, the hatred in this passage isn't spite, but zeal for God. In 'the day of salvation' the New Testament will re-direct this fighting spirit"* toward the real enemy behind all evil. Also note, David leaves final justice to God. But David's wording here is in the same form as the loyalty oaths many near-eastern kings required in his day. Scholars say David is showing his intense desire to align himself with God alone, but is also admitting an oath is needed: he realizes he could be pulled into the same evil. The seeds of these wicked attitudes are in him, too.

Now read David's concluding declaration of verses 23-24. Write the verses out.

12. Does this seem very courageous? What truths has David learned as he concludes with these words of prayer?

13. As we open our lives to God in this way the same great power, tenderness and commitment that first created us will be at work “growing us up,” making us like His Son. Read I John 1:7-9, I Thessalonians 5:23-24 . What do these verses add?

David Roper wraps up his thoughts on Psalm 139 this way:

God saw you and took delight in you...loved [you] and said, “It is good!” Some day...you’ll love it too and will forget the self you now abhor. If you could but see yourself now as you will be one day, you would be stupefied...

So, on ahead there is unimagined splendor, but even now you are being beautified, “metamorphosed” from one degree of glory to the next. (In II Corinthians 3:18, Paul’s exact word, metamorphoomai, means “to change the essential form or nature of something, to become entirely different.”) The love of God is at work in you to transform unsightliness into the inexpressible beauty of holiness... The love that moves the sun and stars and fills the earth with beauty is making you lovely. It is happening now. It will go on forever and ever, for there is no end to infinite love.

14. Consider your own heart and life today. After studying this psalm, can you make verses 23-24 your request too? Use those words as your closing prayer.