

Standing In Awe Of God

Text: Psalm 139:1-24

Series: The Psalms [#20]

Lyle L. Wahl

September 5, 2010

Theme: **God's Greatness Calls For Worship And Righteousness.**

Introduction

Psalm 139 is a rather unusual Psalm, in more ways than one. King David lets us know from the first line that this is a very personal Psalm—"O LORD, You have searched me and known me." We see this all the way through to the concluding lines which begin with "Search me, O God, and know my heart." Yes, this is a very personal Psalm.

Yet this Psalm also points us to, it teaches us some very important and grand truths about God. Truths, in the not always instantly clear theological terms of omnipresence, omniscience and omnipotence. Yes, there is important instruction in the Psalm.

So it is a Psalm of both personal praise and instruction. In it, one writer notes, "Any small thoughts that we may have of God are magnificently transcended...yet for all its height and depth it remains intensely personal from first to last."¹

As well, there are a couple of sharp, unexpected turns in these twenty four verses. So then, one of the challenges is to see and understand the overall message of the Psalm. Woven throughout this Psalm is the truth of God's greatness and the king's response to it. That is what I want us to see today. The big picture is that *God's greatness calls for worship and righteousness*. We begin with...

Surveying God's Greatness.

King David first turns his thoughts to God knowing and seeing everything. The theological term is omniscience. God is omniscient. But the perspective of the king's theology is not scholastic, nor even general, but personal. He says to God, "You have searched *me* and known *me*." This term *search* means to explore, investigate, examine, and probe. It is never a casual search, but a serious, detailed search.

We see the thoroughness of God's searching in 1 Corinthians 2:10 which tells us that the Holy Spirit "searches all things, even the depths of God." The *all things* includes us and our deepest, most private and secret things, both good and bad. Psalm 44:21 reminds us that God "knows the *secrets* of the heart." Moses wrote in Psalm 90, "You [God] have placed our iniquities before You, our *secret sins* in the light of Your presence" (8). And David

admonished his son Solomon, to serve God “with a whole heart and a willing mind; for the LORD *searches all hearts, and understands every intent of the thoughts.*”²

God’s sees clearly even what to us is shrouded in darkness. God says that my heart, your heart, “is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick.” Then He asks, “Who can understand it?” God answers His own question, “I, the LORD, *search* the heart, I test the mind. Because David was committed to God and His righteousness he did not fear God’s searching, but welcomed it. He even asked God to search his heart, as we see at the end of the Psalm.

Inseparably linked to God’s searching is His knowing. David said God had searched and known him. God has compassion on those who fear Him, Psalm 103:14 tells us, because He “knows our frame; He is mindful that we are but dust.” God knows our make up, after all, He created us. When God called Jeremiah to speak for Him He told him,

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I have appointed you a prophet to the nations.”⁴

Here in Psalm 139, David declares in verse 16 that God knew him in his mother’s womb. Then, God knows what we think are small things, such as when we sit down and stand up, just as He knows what we see as big things. God’s knowledge is perfect.⁵ A. W. Tozer wrote,

“God knows instantly and effortlessly all matter and all matters, all mind and every mind, all spirit and all spirits, all being and every being, all creaturehood and all creatures, every plurality and all pluralities, all law and every law, all relations, all causes, all thoughts, all mysteries, all enigmas, all feeling, all desires, every unuttered secret, all thrones and dominions, all personalities, all things visible and invisible in heaven and in earth, motion, space, time, life, death, good, evil, heaven, and hell.

“Because God knows all things perfectly,” Tozer continues, “He knows no thing better than any other thing, but all things equally well. He never discovers anything. He is never surprised, never amazed. He never wonders about anything nor (except when drawing men out for their own good) does He seek information or ask questions.”⁶

One little boy asked his friend, “How can God do that? How can He know everything I do?” His friend said, “It’s simple, God uses the internet and just Googles you.” That was his explanation. As David reflected on God searching and knowing him, he didn’t try to explain how God does this. He realized God’s perfect knowledge is as far beyond his ability to understand as it is wonderful. He was in awe of God. Look at verse 6, “Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is too high, I cannot attain to it.”

Next, David turned his thoughts to God being present everywhere. The theological term is omnipresent. God is omnipresent. Let's pick it up at verse 7.

“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.” (7-12)

God is spirit. One of the things this means is that He is not limited in terms of space. God does not, as it were, divide Himself or His attention into all the places that exist and so be partially present everywhere. Jeremiah 23 records God saying, “Am I a God who is near ... and not a God far off? Can a man hide himself in hiding places so I do not see him’ ... Do I not fill the heavens and the earth?” (23-24). God is everywhere all the time, at the same time, with His entire being.

This is quite different from the erroneous idea of pantheism, which teaches that god is *in* everything. He is in you, but also in the pew, hymnal and the walls of this building. He is in everything, and so then everything makes up or equals God. There is no personal god who is distinct from the universe in pantheism.

Many people get the impression that David was trying to hide from God, or at least fearful of God being wherever he was. It is true that when people sin, when we are not right with God, we try to run and hide from Him. That has been true since Adam and Eve first sinned and so tried to hide from God in the garden.

But David is not running away from God in this Psalm. He is running to God. The overall tone and language of the Psalm is positive. David is identifying with God. After he speaks about God being everywhere, he says in verse 10 that God leads him wherever He is. Then in verse 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.” And in verse 17, “How precious also are Your thoughts to me, O God! How vast is the sum of them!” No, David was neither running from God nor was he fearful that God would find him. He was assured by, he gained confidence and hope from knowing that God was with him wherever he was.

The last part of God's greatness that King David surveys is God's all-powerful, creative nature. Specifically, he focuses on God creating him, creating us. The theological term is omnipotent. God is omnipotent, He is all-powerful. Look again at David's description, beginning in verse 13.

“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 wonder-

fully 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.” (13-16)

God is the all-powerful Creator who gives life. There would be no life, there would be nothing if God were not actively involved in giving life, in bringing things into being. The apostle Paul wrote of Christ in Colossians 1,

“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.” (15-17)

God described Himself through Isaiah as “the LORD, your Redeemer, and the one who formed you from the womb, I, the LORD, am the maker of all things, stretching out the heavens by Myself and spreading out the earth all alone.”⁷ Jeremiah prayed to God,

“Ah Lord GOD! Behold, You have made the heavens and the earth by Your great power and by Your outstretched arm! Nothing is too difficult for You.”⁸

God is the Creator, but He also, as we read in Colossians 1, is the One who is in control of all things. Go back to verse 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.”

Job said of man, “... his days are determined, the number of his months is with You [God]; and his limits You have set so that he cannot pass.”⁹ I cannot today set out today, and we cannot grasp in our lifetimes, all the questions about God’s sovereignty and our free and responsible actions. But Scripture makes it clear that God is not only the Creator, but the Ordainer of all things, including our lives.

God guided David’s reflection so that he came to understanding something of God’s greatness. So what? What are we to do with this truth? God never gives us insight and knowledge so we can say “That’s nice”, and move on with our day, nor so we can simply store it away in a database in our minds. God gives us insight and knowledge so we will know Him and ourselves better, so we will draw closer to Him, so we will love and obey Him, so we will respond to Him as we should.

King David blazed a path of how believers should respond to God's greatness. He shows us that *God's greatness calls for worship and righteousness*. So let's turn to David's example, to...

Responding To God's Greatness.

David shows us several impressive and imperative steps here. The first is to humbly and reverently worship God. To truly worship God is to truly declare with all that we are, in all that we do, the matchless greatness of the character and work of God. King David acknowledged, declared and sang about God's greatness, and that it was beyond his ability to understand. Go back to verse 6 again. "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is too high, I cannot attain to it." This great warrior-king, a man who pursued fellowship with God, who taught others about God, realized his first priority in responding to God's greatness was to worship Him, and to worship humbly.

Bernard of Clarivaux wrote that "humility is the virtue by which a man recognizes his own unworthiness because he really knows himself."¹⁰ After Job's long ordeal of being tested, suffering, of God being silent, God finally spoke. He put Job in his place. "Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?"¹¹ When God finished speaking, Job told God, "I have declared that which I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know."¹² Job was no longer demanding a debate with God. He was in awe of God. He humbly repented and worshiped God.

Then think of Paul, the brilliant theologian, summing up his great doctrinal section of Romans by exclaiming,

"Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to him again? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen."¹³

God's greatness, including these qualities as well as others such as His holiness and love, calls for us to humbly and reverently worship Him. In fact, true worship must be humble and reverent. There is no room for who I am and what I have done in true worship.

In his worship David also thanked God. Verse 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."

Another example is Israel at the Red Sea. After God delivered them from the pursuing Egyptians, Moses and the people burst into a song giving thanks to God for His great

deliverance.¹⁴

There is one more aspect of David's worship here. Look at verse 17.

“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.” (17-18)

He loved, valued, treasured God's thoughts, God's truth and instruction.

The second imperative step of response to God's greatness is to boldly take our stand with Him. Drop down to verse 19.

“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.” (19-22)

Where did this come from? David has been singing about God's greatness and now this? What's it doing here? Why are his words so strong?

We looked at Psalms 58 and 59 two weeks ago, two of the imprecatory Psalms, or Psalms that call for God's righteous judgment on the wicked. These four verse are just that—a call for God's righteous judgment on the wicked. But, again, *Why here?*

The greatness of God, His sovereignty, holiness, love, goodness and care have moved David to once again boldly declare his allegiance to God with no compromise. Recall Psalm 1's opening lines.

“How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers! But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night.” (1-2)

In Psalm 26 David wrote,

“I do not sit with deceitful men, nor will I go with pretenders. I hate the assembly of evildoers, and I will not sit with the wicked. I shall wash my hands in innocence, and I will go about Your altar, O LORD, that I may proclaim with the voice of thanksgiving and declare all Your wonders.” (4-7)

Yes, David was committed to teaching transgressors God's ways and to seeing them converted,¹⁵ but he was not compromising with them. Note how David describes them.

- Verse 19, wicked men of bloodshed.
- Verse 20, God's enemies who speak against Him wickedly.

- Verse 21, those who rise up against God.
- Verse 22, God's enemies, who then were David's enemies.

As I noted in Psalms 58 and 59, we are never to pray anything like this in anger or with a desire for revenge. We are to pray and work for all to hear the gospel and come to God. As well, we are to boldly take *our* stand with God. In a time when many talk about the limitless shades of gray and say there is no certain black and white, when many say we should never draw any lines, we are to courageously take our stand with God and His truth, never compromising with His enemies and their falsehoods because He is the great Sovereign God who has redeemed us.

And just as verse 19 was an abrupt and unexpected change, verse 23 is another abrupt change that shows us that we are to respond to God's greatness by sincerely asking and trusting Him to lead us in His way. Verse 23.

“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.” (23-24)

After boldly taking his stand with God and not compromising with God's enemies, the king quickly, insightfully, beautifully turns his eyes and heart back to his relationship with God.

He opened the Psalm by stating that God had searched and known all about Him. Now he closes by asking God to keep on searching and knowing his heart. He wants God to try him, to probe and examine him to see if there is any *hurtful way* in him—something he might not even be aware of.

Hurtful. In the KJV, *wicked*; in the NIV, *offensive*. At the root of this word are the ideas of pain, distress, grief and sorrow. The various forms and related words were used to describe physical and emotional pain and sorrow. The cause of hurt here, David makes clear, is something that is wrong, that is, sin. Some related forms are rendered as

- *brokenhearted*, God heals the brokenhearted.¹⁶
- As *distort*, David's enemies distorted his words.¹⁷
- As *grieved*, Israel rebelled against God and so grieved His Holy Spirit.¹⁸

David did not want any sin in his heart that might hurt others, including those who were God's enemies.

Then, as he closes, he asks God, “lead me in the everlasting way.” Turn ahead a page or two to Psalm 143, where David prays in verse 10, “Teach me to do Your will, for You are my God; let Your good Spirit lead me on level ground.” The truths of God's greatness led David to want to know and understand more, to want the LORD his Shepherd to lead him in the true, loving, everlasting way. We see this same connection in Psalm 119. In verse 73 the writer prays, “Your hands made me and fashioned me; give me understanding, that I may learn Your commandments.” David responded to this glimpse of God's greatness by

asking God to be his guide, not the prevailing philosophies, nor the might of the wicked, nor yet his own dreams and ideas.

Conclusion.

The Psalm opens and closes with King David *standing in awe of God*. That's where we should be as well. David surveyed God's greatness and responded with worship and righteousness. Three thousand years later the message is unchanged, *God's greatness calls for worship and righteousness*.

You've heard the quip, "I heard opportunity knocking at my door, but by the time I unhooked the chain, pulled back the bolt, turned the locks and shut off the burglar alarm, it was gone." Do we have, how many barriers do we have to recognizing God's greatness and truly responding to Him each day with worship and righteous living?

As you take time with God now, thank Him for His greatness, examine how you have looking for and taking in the evidence of His greatness, determine to follow King David's example, to respond with worship and righteousness.

¹ 16 Derek Kidner. *Psalms 73-150*. Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973, page 463.

² 1 Chronicles 28:9.

³ Jeremiah 17:9-10.

⁴ Jeremiah 1:5.

⁵ Job 37:16.

⁶ A. W. Tozer. *The Knowledge Of The Holy*. New York: Harper and Row, 1978, pages 62-63.

⁷ Isaiah 44:24.

⁸ Jeremiah 32:17.

⁹ Job 14:5.

¹⁰ Bernard of Clairvaux. *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works*. Trans. Gillian R. Evans. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987, p. 103.

¹¹ Job 38:2.

¹² Job 42:3.

¹³ Romans 11:33-36.

¹⁴ Exodus 15:1-21.

¹⁵ Psalm 51:13.

¹⁶ Psalm 147:3.

¹⁷ Psalm 56:5.

¹⁸ Isaiah 63:10.

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