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Psalm 139

Fourth Message

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A SONG OF SECURITY

SERIES: SONGS FOR TROUBLED HEARTS

In this series, we have been studying lament psalms. I hope you are beginning to see how valuable they are and how much they can help us get to know God in the crises of our lives.

Of the approximately 50 lament songs, 47 mention an enemy. As you remember, the king of the nation acted as God's representative and was responsible for establishing God's kingdom on earth. Invariably, he faced opposition just as Jesus did. You and I will also meet opposition as we seek to establish the lordship of Christ in our own homes and hearts and as we seek to fulfill the great commission. There is an evil force bent on hindering our efforts and destroying us. As we read these lament Psalms, we can learn about what gave the king the ability to endure in the midst of the crises and struggles of his life.

In preparation for our study of Psalm 139, I want to read a letter from a young father as shared by James Dobson in *Parenting Isn't for Cowards*. Many of you will identify with the struggles he faces. He says:

The reason I'm writing is that the Lord has blessed us so much, and I should be full of joy. But I have been depressed for about 10 months now.

I don't know whether to turn to a pastor, a physician, a psychologist, a nutritionist or a chiropractor.

Last September the Lord blessed us with a beautiful baby boy. He is just wonderful. He is cute and smart and strong. We just can't help but love him. But he has been very demanding. The thing that made it hardest for me was last semester Margie was taking classes three nights a week to finish her BA degree and I took care of little Danny. He cried and sobbed the whole time we were together. He would eventually go to sleep if I would hold him, but then I was afraid to put him down for fear he would wake up. I was used to being able to pay my bills, work out the budget, read, file mail, answer letters, type lists, etc., in the evening, but all this had to be postponed until Margie was here.

It was a real depressing time for me. I just couldn't handle all that crying. It was worse because Margie was breast-feeding him. I got very tired and started having a great deal of trouble getting up in the morning to go to work. I started getting sick very easily.

I have not been able to cope with these things. I really should be at work at 8:00, but I haven't been there before 9:00 or 9:30 in months. It seems like I'm always fighting the flu. I love our baby a lot and I wouldn't trade him for anything in the world. But I don't understand why I'm so depressed. Sure, Margie gets tired because we can't seem to get Danny to bed before 11 or 12 midnight and he wakes up twice per night to be fed. But she's not depressed. All this getting awakened at night really gets to me and I don't even have to get up to feed him.

Another thing that has been a constant struggle is leaving Danny in the nursery at church. He isn't content to be away from us very

long so they end up having to track Margie down almost every Sunday. We hardly ever get to be together. This has been going on for 11 months now.

There are a couple of other things that probably contribute to my depression. They are (1) responsibilities at work; we're short-handed and I'm trying to do too much; (2) spending too many weekends with yard work or trying to fix up our fixer-upper house; and (3) our finances, which are very limited. Sixty-four percent of our income goes to pay for our house and there's not much left over. We don't want Margie to go to work, so we are on a meticulous budget. It's down to the bare essentials, now. I get so tired of that.

We have all the things we would ever dream of at our age (27). Our own neat little house in a good neighborhood, a job I consider a ministry. We have a fine healthy boy, each other, and not least of all, our life in Christ.

I have no reason to be depressed and tired all the time. I come home from work so exhausted that I don't even want Danny near me. He hangs on to Margie and she can't even fix dinner if I don't get him out of her hair. I just don't know how she stands it.

She must have a higher tolerance as far as not getting anything done is concerned.

If you have any insights as to what I should do, please let me know. Thanks and God bless you.

Any one of us could write a similar letter. Although there are some things we could recommend to help this man in his situation, we often find ourselves in situations without any easy answers—when there are no quick fixes and the crisis persists. There is an evil one who seeks our destruction and who will use anything he can to undermine the lordship of Christ in our lives.

Psalm 139 reveals the resources which will help us cope. David, the author, is again surrounded by enemies who are determined to destroy him. In the midst of his present crisis, he writes about the two significant attributes of God which have sustained him in his life. The Psalm falls into four paragraphs, each composed of six verses. In the first two paragraphs, David contemplates the two attributes which have given him strength. In the final two paragraphs, he shares two significant discoveries he has learned about himself in the process.

Let us look at the psalm in detail. David begins by sharing a significant attribute about God in verses 1-6.

I. God Knows Me Intimately (139:1-6)

O Lord, Thou hast searched me and known me.

Thou dost know when I sit down and when I rise up;

Thou dost understand my thoughts from afar.

Thou dost scrutinize my path and my lying down,

And art intimately acquainted with all my ways.
 Even before there is a word on my tongue,
 Behold, O Lord, Thou dost know it all.
 Thou hast enclosed me behind and before,
 And laid Thy hand upon me.
 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
 It is too high, I cannot attain to it. (Ps 139:1-6 NASB)

The first attribute that brings David strength is God's omniscience (a theological word meaning "God knows all"). He reveals this truth in the summary statement in verse 1: "You have searched and known me." In these verses, it is as if David allows the magnifying glass of this truth to shine directly on his own life. His conclusion from the experiment is: "God, you know me!"

Almost every line shouts this main point. Verse 1 says, "You know me," while verse 2 reveals, "You know when I sit down." Verse 3 says, "You scrutinize." Verse 4 declares, "Before a word is on my tongue, you know it all." Finally, in verse 6, David exclaims, "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me!" You only have to know how to read to get the point!

There are three wonderful facts about God's knowledge that are revealed in these verses. The first is: *God's knowledge is extensive*. The word "search" always has in mind probing and penetrating, seeking something that is difficult to find. This word was used for Joshua and Caleb "spying out" the land and for "mining" gold. In this passage, it refers to the ability to know a man's motives and thoughts. Although it is difficult for us to get inside another man's mind, it is not difficult for God. He peels us as he would an onion, layer by layer, until he reaches the core. David reminds us that God knows us better than we know ourselves.

Second, *God's knowledge is continual*. In verse 2, David uses a Hebrew figure of speech which combines opposites to express a totality: "when I sit down and when I rise up." This means "all the time." Thus, he declares that God knows him every second of the day. From the time we got out of bed, throughout our day, and throughout our lives, God knows our every thought and motive. Does this amaze you?

Third, *God's knowledge is universal*. Verse 3 says, "Thou dost scrutinize my path and my lying down, and art intimately acquainted with all my ways." God is everywhere we go. The word for "lying down" refers to our most private moments and our most private act, sexual intercourse. Whether we are in public or private, on a trip or at home, God is intimately acquainted with our ways. Even before we articulate our intentions, God knows them. David says, "Even before there is a word on my tongue, behold, O Lord, Thou does know it all."

Such knowledge is too wonderful, too awesome! It is so incomprehensible, yet it is comforting to David. Perhaps, God's omniscience concerning you causes you to cringe. A better understanding of the Hebrew concept of "knowledge" will help us. The word implies not only information but intimacy and love—a personal relationship. Not only does God know us, he loves us. The fact that he knows us so intimately and loves us so deeply will enable us to handle the circumstances we face.

From this knowledge and love, we can draw our sense of well-being. Most of you are familiar with 1 Corinthians 13 in which Paul describes agape love. We often read this chapter, as we should, as speaking about the kind of love we should have for one another.

Have you ever thought of it as describing God's love for you? He is patient and kind. He knows you intimately.

The second attribute is given in verses 7-12.

II. God is with me always (139:7-12)

Where can I go from Thy Spirit?
 Or where can I flee from Thy presence?
 If I ascend to heaven, Thou art there;
 If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, Thou art there.
 If I take the wings of the dawn,
 If I dwell in the remotest part of the sea,
 Even there Thy hand will lead me,
 And Thy 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 Thee,
 And the night is as bright as the day.
 Darkness and light are alike to Thee. (139:7-12)

The second attribute David focuses on is God's omnipresence which simply means "he is everywhere". Not only does God know us, he is personally present with us.

David looks at this knowledge first from a vertical plane in verse 8: "If I ascend to heaven, Thou art there! If I make my bed in Sheol, Thou art there!" Again he uses a figure of speech, a merism of opposites, to express totality. From heaven to hell, God is everywhere on the vertical plane. But these statements of opposites are qualitative as well as quantitative. Heaven signifies a state of joy and hope, while hell symbolizes darkness, disappointment, and death. In times of happiness, hope and bliss, God is there. In times of deep disappointment and pain, God is still there. Even though David feels as though he is in hell, he knows that God is with him. In whatever crisis we find ourselves, as his children, we can know that God not only knows about it, he is present with us.

Then David looks at the horizontal plane in verse 9: "If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea." As he thinks of flying from east to west, he imagines himself as a bird taking on the "wings of dawn," flying with the speed of light to the far sea. Notice the merism again as he thinks about flying from the eastern dawn to the western sunset. In the ancient Near East, the east where the sun rises was seen as heaven and the west was the place of darkness and death.

I will never forget when we travelled to the Middle East in January as a pastoral staff. At one point, we drove from Israel to Egypt. As we entered the western part of Cairo, we were overwhelmed with the picture of death, for we were surrounded by graveyards. The western side of the Nile was the place of death. All of the temples were on the eastern side, the place of life.

Do you see David's point? No matter where we are, no matter what desperate situation surrounds us, God will never forsake us. In one of his most discouraging and darkest moments, David says, "Even there Thy hand will lead me, and Thy right hand will lay hold of me." Maybe you are in a difficult situation now or have recently suffered some loss. Maybe the wound is still tender. Perhaps, it is too early to know why it is happening, or you may never know. Believe me, God has not left you. He will never walk away from you. You will never find yourself in a situation that has not been carefully screened by his loving, sovereign hand.

David imagines himself in utter darkness in verses 11-12. The word translated “overwhelmed” means “to crush.” It is the same word used in Genesis 3 when God told Eve the serpent would crush the heel of her seed, but the seed would ultimately crush his head. David says, “If I feel overwhelmed, even the darkness is not night to you.”

Having spoken of these two awesome attributes of God, his omniscience and his omnipresence, David steps back to explain how he knows them to be true.

Notice verse 13 begins with “for.” He now gives the basis for his declarations of these truths. Because these truths are solid, David realizes two significant facts about himself. The first one is given in verses 13-18.

III. I am Created by God: My Situation is Secure (139:13-18)

For Thou didst form my inward parts;
 Thou didst weave me in my mother's womb.
 I will give thanks to Thee, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
 Wonderful are thy works,
 And my soul knows it very well.
 My frame was not hidden from Thee,
 When I was made in secret,
 And skillfully wrought in the depths of the earth.
 Thine eyes have seen my unformed substance;
 And in Thy book they were all written,
 The days that were ordained for me,
 When as yet there was not one of them.
 How precious also are Thy 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 Thee. (139:13-18)

In these verses, David looks at his own creation and realizes that God made him. This is why God knows him so well. David is saying, “I am not a chance product of an impersonal universe. I’m not a biological accident!” Without denying genetics, he sees beyond the biological realities to the spiritual realities—that there is a Creator. In response, he says, “I will give thanks to you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.”

No wonder we struggle with identity crises when we are constantly being told we are merely struggling mortals on an obscure planet located in a second-rate galaxy, one among billions. Scripture has a different viewpoint. We did not just happen.

Dr. Paul Brand is well-known among medical circles for his pioneering work with leprosy and hand surgery. In fact, most medical textbooks on hand surgery have chapters written by him. He often speaks of the awe he experiences when thinking about the creation of the human body. Listen to what he writes:

I could fill a room with volumes of surgical textbooks that describe operations people have devised for the human hand: different ways to rearrange the tendons, muscles, and joints—thousands of operations. But I don’t know of a single operation anyone has devised that has succeeded in improving a normal hand. It’s beautiful. All the techniques are to correct the deviants, the one hand in a hundred that is not functioning as God designed. There is no way to improve on the hand he gave us.

I concur with Isaac Newton, who said, “In the absence of any other proof, the thumb alone would convince me of God’s existence.”

David even looks at where God creates us. In the dark, watery chamber of our mothers’ wombs, God produces his masterpieces. Look at verses 15-16 again:

My frame was not hidden from Thee,
 When I was made in secret,
 And skillfully wrought in the depths of the earth.
 Thine eyes have seen my unformed substance;
 And in Thy book they were all written,
 The days that were ordained for me,
 When as yet there was not one of them. (139:15-16)

God is consciously involved in the fetus developing in the mother’s womb. There is much questioning today about when an embryo becomes a human being. David does not talk about himself as an impersonal collection of cells. Notice the words “we,” “I,” and “my frame.” The marvel of the human body has convinced him that God is with him and knows him intimately.

God knows us because He made us. He knows us inside out. He knows our crises and how we respond to them. He even knows how much we can handle. And he has a wonderful purpose for our lives.

I am reading a fascinating book entitled *Life and Death in Shanghai* by Nien Chang. It is her marvelous testimony of courage. After the communists overthrew Chiang Kai-Shek in 1949, Nien and her husband decided to stay because her husband was a general manager for Shell Oil Company, which was the only multi-national company that chose to remain. When her husband died in 1957, Shell hired her as a special advisor. In 1966, Mao Tse-Tung launched the Great Proletarian Revolution, and Nien was arrested, beaten and taken to prison where she remained in solitary confinement for over six years.

One account in her book parallels what David is saying. One afternoon, while lying in her cell, a spider crawled in and began to climb up one of the iron bars of her window. She said she watched it climb steadily to the top, and it was such a long walk for this tiny creature. When it reached the top, it swung out and descended on a silken thread spun from its body. After it secured its thread to the other end of the bar, it crawled back to where it had started and swung out in a new direction. Nien was fascinated by the fact that this spider knew exactly what to do and where to take the next thread without any hesitation or mistakes. When it had made the frame, it proceeded to make an intricate web that was perfect with all the strands evenly spaced. As Nien watched this architectural feat, she was flooded with questions: Who had taught the spider to make the web? Could it really have acquired that skill through evolution, or did God make that spider with the ability to make a web for catching food and perpetuating its species? This spider helped her to see that God was in control. From then on, Mao Tse-Tung and his revolutionaries seemed much less menacing. She says, “I felt a renewal and a hope surge inside of me.”

This is what David is saying. Since God made him and knows him, he obviously knows his circumstances. Having laid hold of these marvelous truths, David looks around at his world and sees a difficult and confusing place. He concludes this Psalm by sharing with us a second truth he has learned about himself in verses 19-24.

IV. I Belong to God: My Identity is Secure (139:19-24)

O that Thou wouldst slay the wicked, O God;
 Depart from me, therefore, men of bloodshed.
 For they speak against Thee wickedly,
 And Thine enemies take Thy name in vain.
 Do I not hate those that hate Thee, O Lord?
 And do I not loathe those who rise up against Thee?
 I hate them with the utmost hatred;
 They have become my enemies.
 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. (139:19-24)

Having suffered because of his love for God and having felt in his own body the pain of others' hatred of God, David has learned an important truth: "I am God's person." He is saying "Lord, I don't understand this problem of evil, but the persecution has taught me that I do know where I belong. I know my identity as your son, and I have made a commitment to you." Is this issue clear in your life? Is your commitment to the lordship of Jesus Christ firm?

Backing off, David realizes that he has painted a rigid picture. Things are not always so black and white. The good guys do not always wear the white hats. He looks at himself and knows that at times even he is gray. Thus, he says, "I am not always sure about myself. Search me and penetrate me, bring to light any evil in me so that I might deal with it. I want your lordship in my life to be clear."

Maybe you find yourself to be without any understanding regarding your life or without a relationship with the God of the universe. I want you to know that your life has meaning and a purpose. You have worth and dignity because you are created in his image. And he has a purpose for your life. It is my prayer that you would come to see God as he really is: a God who knows you and loves you, a God who longs to be with you always.

The greatest demonstration of this is the cross of Jesus Christ. Jesus said, "I will never leave you or forsake you." When he returned to the Father, he left us the Holy Spirit as a guarantee that he would one day return and take us to be with him. Jesus Christ gave his life to pay the penalty for the sin and darkness in your heart and to offer the free gift of salvation to any who would come to him.

In this series I am indebted to Dr. Bruce Waltke for his exegetical insights.

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