

**PSALM 139:1-24 ESV**

1 To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David. O LORD, you have searched me and known me! 2 You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. 3 You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. 4 Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O LORD, you know it altogether. 5 You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. 6 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it. 7 Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? 8 If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! 9 If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, 10 even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me. 11 If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night," 12 even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you. 13 For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. 14 I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. 15 My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. 16 Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them. 17 How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! 18 If I would count them, they are more than the sand. I awake, and I am still with you. 19 Oh that you would slay the wicked, O God! O men of blood, depart from me! 20 They speak against you with malicious intent; your enemies take your name in vain. 21 Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you? 22 I hate them with complete hatred; I count them my enemies. 23 Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! 24 And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!

**STRUCTURE**

- I. **Introduction: God has searched and known David (1-6)**
  - a. David marvels at the totality of God's searching and knowing (1-4)
  - b. David dreads the totality of God's searching and knowing (5-6)
- II. **Body: David wrestles with God's searching and knowing (7-18)**
  - a. David longs to escape, yet loves, God's searching and knowing (7-12)
  - b. David learns to only love God's searching and knowing (13-18)
- III. **Conclusion: "God, search and know me!" (19-24)**
  - a. David embraces God by opposing evil in other people (19-21)
  - b. David embraces God by opposing evil in himself (22-24)

**GENERAL COMMENTARY:**

Theologians will find much material in Psalm 139 for treatises about our Creator's omniscience, omnipresence, and sovereignty. However, David intends not to theologize abstractions but rather to unlock their implications. God's omniscience means He knows everything about our personality and temperament; our behavior and motivations; our words and thoughts; our bodies and spirits; our past, present, and future. This knowledge results from God's thorough searching that feels to David a bit... nosy. Nobody wants to be investigated. Practically, David longs to flee, but God's omnipresence means he can't. Psalm 139 reflects David's wrestling match with a God he can't escape. By the end, David's longing for escape turns to a prayer of total embrace. If you've ever wanted God to just leave you alone—to let you make your own choices and stop testing you with trials—you will relate to David's frustration over God's relentless "scrutiny," which, he gradually learns, is God's loving pursuit.

The first and final stanzas correlate strongly, forming an inclusio (think, bookends), which emphasizes David's journey from beginning to end. At first, David observes how God has "searched" (vv. 1, 3) and "known" him (vv. 1, 4); at the end, David pleads for God to "search... and know" him (v. 23). In between these bookends, David expresses discomfort with God's probing by employing military vernacular that likens God to a pervasive enemy (v. 5) and a high fortress wall (v. 6). David's first reaction is to flee, but he can't (vv. 7-12). This begins a daydream that extends all the way to verse 18, where he climactically awakes and realizes, "Why would I WANT to flee God's loving presence?!"

David's daydream in vv. 7-18 instructs us in the power of meditation. The more David dwells on God, the more he perceives God's desirability. The divine "hand" that formally hemmed David in and crushed him (v. 10) now leads him and upholds him amidst chaos and evil (vv. 9-10). By the end, David will not just observe God's leadership (v. 10: "even there your hand shall lead me") but pray for it (v. 24: "lead me in the way everlasting"). Therefore, David's meditation reveals that God's intention in scrutinizing him is not to harm him but to guide him. The same hands that "knitted" David's parts and composed his life story will carefully pave his path to eternity.

Upon realizing God's heart in "searching and knowing"—that it is for the purpose of better loving him—David's introductory observation becomes a prayer for God to search and know him all the more. This prayer appears on the heels of David's pledge of allegiance to God over evildoers. Many wonder at this strange placement, but his pledge makes perfect sense. Having embraced God completely, David opposes God's enemies completely. We cannot love God and the world simultaneously (1 Jhn. 2:15). This closing section reminds us that to totally embrace God means that we totally reject evil—whether it appears in other people or even ourselves.

## VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENTARY:

*1 To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David. O LORD, you have searched me and known me! 2 You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. 3 You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. 4 Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O LORD, you know it altogether. 5 You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. 6 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it.*

—"to the choirmaster. A Psalm of David": Moses introduced a liturgy of sacrifice, but David brought the liturgy of music. Psalm 139, like all the psalms, was meant to be sung and played.

—"O LORD, you have searched and known me":

- This line introduces the theme of Psalm 139: God's searching and knowing.
- David will end like he began, turning observations into prayers:
  - "you have searched and known me" (v. 1).
  - "Search me, O God, and know my heart" (v. 23).
- "searched": Waltke provides a synonym: "probed". Lovitt, whom Waltke quotes, depicts this Hebrew word as "penetrating, diligent, and difficult."
- "known": God's knowing results from his searching. He has probed David so deeply that He knows David completely and intimately.

—Verses 2-3 explore the theme of verse 1, that God searches and knows David.

- Verse 2 expands on "you have... known me" (v. 1) by saying, "You know when I sit down and when I rise up" (v. 2).
- Verse 3 expands on "you have searched me" (v. 1) by saying, "You search out my path and my lying down."

—This section (as well as the whole psalm) employs merisms—a poetic device depicting opposites to convey totality. For instance, "day and night" = totality of time. Merisms in the present section include: sit down/rise up (v. 2), path/lying down (v. 3). Poetically, David intends to show how God has searched and known him totally. He has left no stone unturned.

—"Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O LORD, you know it altogether": humans can investigate the past but only guess about the future. God is not so limited. He knows our words "even before" we speak them.

—God's watchful eye penetrates time and space. He searched us out before we lived out a single day. Such a thought at first inspires awe but then trepidation. David says, "You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me" (v. 5). Dr. Waltke says David draws from military vernacular to depict God's treatment. Nobody wants to be scrutinized. Nobody wants to be investigated. David's reaction is all too human. God's unlimited knowledge and interest in his every move reminds him of military foes surrounding him with weapons. David feels terrified.

—God's knowledge is "wonderful" and "high." Waltke comments that "high" connotes an imposing wall, as in a military fortress. David feels hemmed in and locked outside of such high knowledge.

—"I cannot attain it":

- "I cannot comprehend it" (NASB); it is "too great for me to understand" (NLT).
- God makes Himself known, but He is also unknowable—at least, to the fullest extent. We can only know what He reveals to us. God is incomprehensible. Relevant verses:

- Deut. 29:29: "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law."
- Ps. 50:12: "If I were hungry I would not tell you, for the world is mine, and all that is in it."
- Ps. 145:3: "Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised, and his greatness is unsearchable."
- Rom. 11:33-36: "Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and how inscrutable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been His counselor? Or who has given a gift to Him that He might be repaid? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be glory forever. Amen."

—In verses 1-6, God searches and knows every action, thought, and word—past, present, or future. Throughout the song, David feels both a holy and unholy fear of the God who knows and searches all. On the holy side, David expresses awe of God (v. 4, 6, 14, 17); on the unholy side, he feels such discomfort over God's scrutiny—"You hem me in" (v. 5); "Where shall I flee" (v. 7)—that he mimics our first parents with a desire to hide (Gen. 3:8-10). Psalm 139 reflects both the human instinct to flee from God and the supernatural revelation that this is not just futile but foolish. Once you understand God's heart, you *crave* His scrutiny (vv. 23-24).

—Waltke: "The first strophe welcomes God's intimate knowledge: 'you are familiar with all my ways' (v. 3), but hostile military metaphors in the second suggest that David attempts to escape it (vv. 5-6).

***7 Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? 8 If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! 9 If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, 10 even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me. 11 If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night," 12 even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you.***

—The psalmist shifts from God's omniscience to His omnipresence, but his theme has not changed: God's intimate searching and knowing of all his ways.

—By shifting to God's omnipresence, His scrutiny becomes more personal. It's not as if God sent an angel to do reconnaissance and report back on David. It's not as though God viewed David's actions from a heavenly surveillance room. No, God saw David because He was with David. He searches and knows us by getting up in our business intimately and personally.

—"go" and "flee" convey David's discomfort with divine inspection.

—"your Spirit": the Holy Spirit possesses divine characteristics because He is divine. Just like the Father and the Son, He is omniscient and omnipresent. Yet, we don't believe in three distinct gods; that is tritheism. We believe in one Triune God: Father, Son, and Spirit. Each is individually God, yet all three Persons together are God, who is one.

—"your presence": the Hebrew word for "presence" is the same as "face". Sometimes, David bemoans that God's face has turned away (Pss. 13:1; 27:9; 44:24; 88:14); here, David actively turns away from God's face.

—I'm reminded of the Athanasian Creed (note: "catholic" means "universal"): *"Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the catholic faith. Which faith except everyone do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly. And the catholic faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity, neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the Substance. For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Ghost. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost is all one, the glory equal, the majesty coeternal."*

—After the introductory statement of verse 7, verses 8-12 explore further God's omnipresence.

—Waltke: "The psalmist's incapability with respect to God's personal omniscience (vv. 5-6) is matched by his incapability with respect to God's presence (vv. 11-12), using a comparative of capability..."

—"heaven... Sheol": (pardon my rabbit trail, but I think you'll have fun with it 😊)

- In the psalmist's understanding, "heaven" meant the sky/universe—directionally up—and "Sheol" meant "the place of the dead"—directionally down. Sheol was more than just the grave; it was a realm that housed spirits, both righteous and unrighteous.
- When Saul called on a witch to perform necromancy to contact Samuel, the deceased prophet, she exclaimed, "I see a god coming up out of the earth" (1 Sam. 28:13), and Samuel complained, "Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?" (28:15).
- In contrast to righteous Samuel, unrighteous enemies also went to Sheol. Isaiah 14:9 prophesies the fate of the king of Babylon: "Sheol beneath is stirred up to meet you when you come; it rouses the

shades to greet you, all who were leaders of the earth; it raises from their thrones all who were kings of the nations."—in other words, wicked kings—"leaders of the earth"—are called "shades" (think, "spirits"), and they greet the wicked king of Babylon. This occurs in "Sheol beneath"—directionally, down.

- I am not suggesting that if you dug far enough you could have found Sheol. Biblical authors thought in terms of "cosmic geography." Down symbolized the place of the departed. Probably because they buried people underground.
- In New Testament Greek, "Sheol" becomes "Hades." Peter tells us that Jesus descended into Hades in death (Acts 2:27). This is because Jesus died a normal human death. When humans died, they went to the place of the dead.
- According to Luke 16:19-23, Hades was divided into two parts: one part for the righteous, which was paradise (cf. 23:43); one part for the wicked, which was torment.
- Within the place of the dead, Jesus proclaimed His victory to fallen angels (1 Pet. 3:19), and he released the righteous from Sheol/Hades into a greater bliss: heaven. Having conquered Death and Hades, the King of Resurrection now holds their keys (Rev. 1:18). In other words, Jesus' resurrection opened the door of Hades so righteous departed spirits could leave. It also opened the door of heaven so they could enter (14:31; Phil. 1:23; 2 Cor. 5:8). Now when saints die, they go straight to heaven to be with Jesus.
- When Jesus returns, Hades will cough up the unrighteous dead who remain in it, and Christ will judge them (Rev. 20:13). Hades is like a holding cell for the unrighteous dead awaiting final judgment—hell, the lake of fire (20:14-15).
- When Christ returns, living and dead saints will receive resurrection bodies and live with Jesus forever (1 Thess. 4:16-17). Heaven is not our ultimate home. It is like a Ritz Carlton—a temporary but really nice hotel—on the way to our ultimate home: the new heavens and new earth (Rev. 21-22).
- There you go. My thoughts on the afterlife. Also, church history's thoughts too.

—It's astounding to consider that God's presence was even in "Sheol"—the place of the dead. Sure, we can imagine him in the "paradise" part of Sheol. But even in the realm of the wicked dead? Yes, even there. For that matter, God is in hell too. Sure, there's a sense in which He's "not there." He's "not there" in the sense that He is "not there to bless." For this reason, Paul can talk about the wicked being "away from the presence of the Lord and the glory of his might" after He judges them at Christ's return (2 Thess. 1:9). They don't experience blessings like the glory of His might. But make no mistake: God is everywhere. Even in Sheol. Even in Hell. If God's presence did not exist in some geographical locale, He would cease to be God. God is omnipresent. Any being who is not omnipresent is not God. (See Rev. 14:10 on hell being eternal torment in God's presence. Again, God is *everywhere*.)

—"wings of the dawn... uttermost parts of the sea":

- Having just employed a vertical merism—Heaven and Sheol—the psalmist now provides horizontal imagery to illustrate God's omnipresence.
- "wings of the dawn" pictures a rising sun with streaks of light extending from east to west. If the psalmist could travel west at the speed of light, he could not outrun God.
- "uttermost parts of the sea" envisions the far side of this imagined journey. Having begun in the east and traveled at the speed of light, he now arrives in the furthest location imaginable: "the uttermost parts of the sea". No human could imagine how far this would extend. It didn't matter. Even if you could outrun the sun and arrive at that place, dancing on the chaotic waters, you would only find that God was already there.
- CSB: "If I fly on the wings of dawn and settle down on the western horizon..."

—"even there your hand shall lead me... right hand shall hold me":

- David seems schizophrenic. At one moment, he's in awe of the Almighty; in the next, he longs to flee. This represents his wrestling match with God. We all wrestle.
- Having felt daunted by God's investigation, David felt trapped. He felt opposed. He felt an urging to sprint as far and as fast as he could. But the more he thought about it, the more he realized—even

if he mounted the wings of dawn, he couldn't outrun God. Now, it dawns on him: this is a good thing. Why would anyone want to outrun God? Yes, God searches us and knows us—but *His intention is good*. He wants to "lead" and "hold" us. By searching and knowing us perfectly, He is perfectly suited to care for us.

- Earlier, God's "hand" hemmed David in painfully (v. 5); now God's "hand" leads and upholds him (v. 10). We are witnessing a transformation. David now realizes that God's searching and knowing serves a holy purpose that results in blessing.

—"darkness/cover... light/night:

- David imagines darkness enveloping him and light turning to night. A scary picture.
- "cover" can be translated "crush" or "bruise". It's the same Hebrew word as in Genesis 3:15, where the offspring of the woman and the serpent "bruise" or "crush" one another. The darkness David envisions is a supernaturally crushing darkness.
- Waltke (quoting Ringgren): "Darkness in the Bible is more than the absence of light: 'It possesses a quality of its own, which unmitigated makes it inimical to life.'"

—"even the darkness is not dark to you... night is bright... darkness is as light with you":

- Ross: "Nothing in the darkness can harm him, for neither darkness nor distance can separate him from God's powerful presence and penetrating knowledge."
- We see the same pattern in vv. 9-10 that occurs in vv. 11-12. David imagines something extreme and painful, but God's presence extends even into such an extreme scenario, transforming it into something beautiful.
  - In vv. 9-10, David imagines having the capacity to sprint at the speed of light from east to the far west, camping out on the waters of chaos. These waters would have been supernaturally supercharged in the mind of an ancient Jew. They associated false gods—demons—with these waters. David concludes his dark reverie with beauty: God camps out even on these dark waters. Not only that, but God leads him and guides him in the face of supernatural foes.
  - In vv. 11-12, David imagines supernatural darkness enveloping and crushing him, but God's comfort extends even there. Dark is scary to us, but it is light for God.

***13 For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. 14 I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. 15 My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. 16 Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them. 17 How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! 18 If I would count them, they are more than the sand. I awake, and I am still with you.***

—"For": verses 13-18 provide an illustration of both God's omniscience (vv. 1-6) and His omnipresence (vv. 7-12), focusing on His creative work (vv. 13-18).

- After highlighting God's infinite presence—even amidst the darkness that is light to Him (vv. 11-12)—David shows how God's presence filled even the darkness of a pregnant belly. Like a photographer developing images in a dark room, God performed His most magnificent creative work in the "dark room" of a mother's womb.
- God's omniscience: Despite the profound darkness of his mother's womb, David's "frame was not hidden" (v. 15), and God's "eyes saw" what no human could (v. 16).
- God's omnipresence: He "knitted" (v. 13) David together, "intricately" (v. 15), even in the womb. God was creatively present in the darkest of places.
- Kidner: "The third stanza brings together and carries forward the thought of the first two: God not only sees the invisible and penetrates the inaccessible, but is operative there, the author of every detail of my being. And the dimension of time is now added to those of space, from before my existence to whatever is implied in the phrase, 'When I wake up.'"

—The darkness of the mother's womb is emphasized by: "hidden" (v. 15), "secret" (v. 15), "depths of the earth" (v. 15). The latter image reminds us of "Sheol" (v. 8), see above. The place of the dead resembles the

womb of life in this way: both are obscure to the human eye but deeply known by God. Figuratively, God turns the darkness of death into a chamber for life.

—Waltke: "All texts about God's fashioning in the womb imply God's loving care (Job 31:15; Isa. 44:2; Jer. 1:5) – recall that the Hebrew word for 'mercy' derives from 'womb' – helping to explain David's outburst of praise. In contrast Job, sick in body and bitter in spirit, accused God of not loving him and so cursed his birth."

—David does not say, "You formed the fetal tissue that would eventually become me." He says, "you knitted ME together in my mother's womb." Abortion is murder, which is why the church universal has rejected it for two thousand years.

—"fearfully and wonderfully made": Kidner comments that "the Hebrew can be legitimately translate 'I praise thee, for I am awesomely wonderful'".

—"wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well": David's reflection inspires wonder and worship. The two hold hands. Worship includes wonder. Cease to wonder, begin to wander.

—"in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them":

- "your book" is a metaphor for God's omniscience and sovereignty. God knows us so intimately, it's as if he's read and re-read the book of our life story infinite times. More than that—He wrote the book. He doesn't just know the contents; He composed them.
- This statement about God's predestination of all our days—including what fills our days—follows a line about God's creativity in the womb. Both actions relate to the same theme. God formed both us and our life story from the same creative genius.
- Waltke: "God does not passively observe the developing embryo but actively programs its future." Waltke is referring to the genetic code, which determines much about our future. Then Waltke adds, "In addition to shaping human personality, God predestined the psalmist's destiny by writing the mortal's personal diary beforehand."
- Scripture stretches our thinking when it comes to His ordination of all things. If God wrote our life story, what's the point of living it? Do we even have choices, or are we just robots responding to God's pre-programming? Worse, why would God write certain parts of our story—specifically, the parts that contain evil? If God is perfectly good, it follows that He can't do evil things. Does this Scripture suggest otherwise?
  - It is helpful to answer life's hardest questions by viewing them through the lens of creation and redemption—God's chief works in the world.
    - In creation, God evaluated His work seven times, each time concluding, "It is good," and climactically, "it is very good." Seven is the number of completion. Everything God does is completely good. As it says in Psalm 119:68: "You are good, and what you do is good."
    - In the immediate aftermath of the creation story, evil entered the story through creation: the serpent (Satan) and mankind. God's heart was for a perfectly good world; evil entered through rebellion against God. As it says Ecclesiastes 7:29, "God made man upright, but he has sought many schemes."
    - In redemption, God promised Adam and Eve that one of their offspring would crush evil and its serpentine source (Gen. 3:15), and He fulfilled this promise ultimately in Jesus—His perfectly good Son who only did good but died by the agency of evil agents, both human and demonic.
    - These evil agents made real choices that aligned with their own evil desires. In this sense, their choices were "free." Nevertheless, God superintended this process from beginning to end to fulfill His promises in Genesis 3:15 (and all Scripture). Even the "free" choices of these evil people fit within God's plan:
      - Acts 2:23: "this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men."

- Acts 4:27-28: "for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place."
  - If God can turn the most wicked injustice in the history of the world into the greatest redemption the world has ever known—He can do the same with injustices we suffer. In fact, He promises to do so (Rom. 8:28).
  - To say that God predestined wicked acts does not mean that He programmed people like robots to crucify His Son. It was not the Holy Spirit, but Satan, who entered Judas on the night the betrayal (Luke 22:3-6). Evil agents crucified Jesus, even though God ordained it.
  - God's ordination is not coercion. Predestination and free choice appear contradictory to us, but the Bible teaches both. Theologians refer to this apparent contradiction as "compatibilism." Predestination and free choice are compatible, not contradictory.
  - Note: I am using "free choice" in the sense that humans are free to do as they desire. Apart from God's grace, none desires God (Rom. 3:11).
- Summary:
  - *Through the lens of creation*, we see that God is good, what He does is good, and evil entered the world through the choices of created agents.
  - *Through the lens of redemption*, we see that God uses freely made choices by evil created agents to fulfill His predestined plan.
- "How precious to me are your thoughts... vast is the sum... they are more than the sand":
  - NLT: "How precious are your thoughts about me"; NIV: "How precious to me are your thoughts"; NIV footnote: "How amazing are your thoughts concerning me"; "How precious are your thoughts for me" (NASB); "How difficult it is to fathom your thoughts about me" (NET).
  - Translators differ on whether the passage focuses on God's general thoughts, or specifically, His thoughts about David. Context suggests that the thoughts in question are specific. This whole section is about David.
  - Therefore, David marvels over how much God has thought about him. He adds that God's thoughts outnumber the sand. Of course, this means, "impossible to number." Someone has calculated the number of granules to approximately 7.5 quintillion, which doesn't help. Suffice it to say that God has thought about you more times than you could count in many billions of years. (Nerd math: it would take 238 billion years to count to 7.5 quintillion at one granule per second.)
  - "precious": Waltke says this word for "precious" connotes rarity—like a precious jewel, whose value owes to its scarcity.
  - This connotation of rarity means the verse contains irony: God's precious/rare thoughts number more than the sand! How can God's thoughts toward us be both rare and innumerable?! The irony magnifies God's incomprehensibility, which has been a theme of the psalm. God's thoughts toward us are valuable like a rare jewel but innumerable like granules of sand.
  - In keeping with the theme of "searching" and "knowing," it's impossible to imagine how thorough God is. Before we drew our first breath, He already thought constantly about us.
  - David's primary point is not his own specialness, but God's. Imagine God fixating His infinite mind on David quintillions of times before his birth... and now multiply that by every human... and now imagine all the thoughts God exercised in the rest of His creation. Our God is unsearchable.

- Throughout the psalm, God has searched David's thoughts (vv. 2, 23), but here David thinks about God's thoughts. David felt probed by God's searching of his own thoughts; he feels inspired by meditation upon God's thoughts. Self-focus rains on our joy, but God-focus sparks it.

—"I awake, and I am still with you":

- It seems like David had entered a dreamlike state, thinking about God thinking about him. Now he snaps out of it—and God is still there. God is with us in both our conscious and unconscious state. He's with us, awake or dreaming.
- With New Testament hindsight, this line might have a second meaning: resurrection. Biblical authors often spoke of death as a "sleep," so David saying, "I awake" could mean that—by the work of Christ—He awakes to eternal life. Even after death, God is with us.
- Kidner: "I am still with thee (18b), taken with the vast background of verses 7-12, can be given no limit, even by death. 'When I awake' may therefore have its strongest sense, a glimpse of resurrection."

***19 Oh that you would slay the wicked, O God! O men of blood, depart from me! 20 They speak against you with malicious intent; your enemies take your name in vain. 21 Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you? 22 I hate them with complete hatred; I count them my enemies. 23 Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! 24 And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!***

—Kidner: "The very clarity of the vision [reference to 'I awake, and I am still with you'] makes the anomaly of evil boasting in full view of God, intolerable; so David's re-entry to the atmosphere of earth creates, as we might say, a sudden incandescence."

—Waltke likewise sees a link between David's "dreamlike reverie" referenced in v. 18 and his resolve in vv. 19-24: "The psalmist's dream of God's sublimities refreshes him to confront boldly the terrible reality of his situation and to commit himself unreservedly to God's scrutiny." So much for "being too heavenly minded to be any earthly good." David's meditation upon God's glory prepares him to face evil in both himself and others.

—Oh, that we might be a people obsessed with God's glory! May seeking His beauty become the "one thing" we seek!! May the cry of our hearts resemble that of Moses—"Show me your glory!" Like Mary, may we "choose what is better"—to sit at Christ's feet. Oh, Lord! Give us the resolve to think about Your Word, Your attributes, and Your works for undistracted stretches!

—Many think, "Why did God have to ruin such a good song with these cursings?!" Do they really make sense as part of the psalm? They do.

—It will prove helpful to say a few words about "imprecatory psalms"—that is, cursing psalms. We find these uncomfortable in our age because the New Testament commands us to bless and pray for our enemies. Beneath my commentary on Psalm 139, at the end of this section, I have included an "appendix" on imprecatory psalms.

—Setting aside, then, the appropriateness of imprecatory psalms in our present age, the question remains: how does this section relate to prior ones about God's omniscience and omnipresence?

- While David has highlighted God's omniscience and omnipresence, illustrating these by God's work in creation, his message centers more on the practical outcome of these theological realities: God has searched and known me thoroughly.
- Since God's searching and knowing appears again in verse 23 ("Search me, O God, and know my heart... know my thoughts!"), we should dispense of any notion that this section does not belong. In David's mind, this section aligns with the others.
- Waltke sees more alignment: "Verbal inclusions frame the psalm: 'search and known (vv. 1b, 23b), 'my thoughts' and 'my anxious thoughts' (vv. 2, 23), and 'way' (vv. 3, 24)."
- Additionally, "lead me" occurs in vv. 10 and 24. David now welcomes the omnipresent God, whose loving leadership cannot be limited by distance or darkness (vv. 9-12).
- We have observed "schizophrenic" David, struggling to decide whether to embrace or run from God's thorough investigation of his life. At one moment, he stands in awe; at the next, he can't stand it any longer. He wants to flee. Finally, by the end of the psalm, David finds his resolve. He no

longer seeks to evade God's all-searching eye—he welcomes it! He prays for it! God's intimate knowledge of us is for our good.

—Despite the inappropriateness of hating people in the new covenant era (see appendix below), the psalmist's curse still strikes an appropriate nerve: rabid jealousy for God's honor. Phinehas was "jealous with my jealousy" (Num. 25:11) when he speared those responsible for sin and plague. The apostle Paul says we who live "at the end of the ages" should learn from this story (1 Cor. 10:6-12). Rather than compromising with idolaters, we must reject such compromise with violent disgust (without physically harming people). Psalm 139 checks our passion for God in this regard. If you don't passionately disdain sin, you don't passionately love God.

—Kidner: "In 'the day of salvation' the New Testament will re-direct this fighting spirit, but it will endorse its singlemindedness."

—Realizing David's journey (vv. 1-18) and resolve (vv. 19-24) helps us better understand the cursing of vv. 19-23. Unsanctified flesh fits no more in Heaven than a dog on Mars. Therefore, David rejects unholiness: both that of the wicked (vv. 19-22) and even of himself (vv. 23-24).

—In finally welcoming God's fully, David realizes that God's "scrutiny"—better, "pursuit"—leads toward a good end: "the way everlasting" (v. 24). God is not Javert from *Les Misérables*, hounding us to hell with legality. God hounds us with love, not legality. He pursues us because He loves us; He searches us to fit us for Himself. Psalm 139 portrays David's journey from suspicion to trust. God's "scrutiny" is a really a pursuit. Love pursues, and God is love.

—Waltke: "I AM's search, in contrast to many human legal searches, is loving, not adversarial."

—Before I got saved, I believed in God; I just thought He was distant. My beliefs matched my desires. I *wanted* God to be distant. The last thing I craved was a Cosmic Party Pooper telling me I couldn't have fun or make my own choices. Then I met Him. For the first time I desired rather than dreaded God's presence. His nearness, His holiness, His Lordship—I suddenly wanted nothing more than these. Once you taste God's goodness, You don't despise His call to "be good." Those who know Him long to be like Him.

—Waltke: "Remarkably, the object of his petition is not God's judgment of the enemy but of himself..

Apparently, he is uncertain that his heart is as wholly devoted to God as he confesses and wants it to be."

—Lovitt (quoted by Waltke): "The poet acknowledges that he is, in the last analysis, unable fully to know and judge himself. There are depths and directions in his motivation and action which he cannot assess."

—Waltke: "Why command I AM to know and lead him if God always knows and leads him? Resolving the enigma unlocks the gate to the message of this psalm."

—In other words, God searches and knows us regardless of whether we welcome it. So, we might as well welcome it! In doing so, we align ourselves with God and eternity rather than the mortal enemies of vv. 19-22.

## APPENDIX

### Thoughts on Imprecatory Psalms:

The "imprecatory psalms" earn their label due to the "imprecations"—curses—called down upon Israel's foes. If the label suggests vindictiveness, then it is a misnomer. The imprecatory psalms are not spiteful or petty; rather, they are prayers for the God of justice to vindicate His righteousness by condemning oppressors.

In the following section, I reflect on (1) primary interpretations of the imprecatory psalms, (2) essential qualifiers for interpreting the imprecatory psalms, (3) reasons we must apply the imprecatory psalms differently than in OT times, and (4) how we can apply the imprecatory psalms today. Please note that my favorite Old Testament scholar, Bruce Waltke, greatly influenced my meditations on this subject.

#### Four Primary Interpretations:

- 1) **The imprecatory psalms are not prayers but prophecies.** In other words, the psalmists are not wishing harm upon their enemies but predicting it. The Hebrew language is flexible, often blurring the line between "May God pour out wrath upon His enemies" and "God will pour out wrath upon His enemies." Nevertheless, some imprecations are so clear, and the language in those instances so inflexible that the explanation falls short.
- 2) **The imprecatory psalms were sinful.** CS Lewis labels the imprecatory psalms "devilish." But how can Scripture be "devilish" and "God-breathed" (2 Tim. 3:16) at the same time? Any solution that suggests Psalmists sinned by what they wrote—and taught Israel to sing—must be discarded.

- 3) **The imprecatory psalms model how to pray against our enemies.** In some ways, this is true. For instance, “break the arm of the wicked” (Ps. 10:15) does not mean “sever their bone”—as if the Psalmist envisioned torture—but rather “break their strength.” What a wise prayer against oppression! Not all imprecatory psalms stop there, however. Psalm 109 requests that the children of one’s enemies become starving orphans (vv. 9-10) who never have families (v. 13). He openly prays that “curses come upon him” (v. 17). Can this possibly square with Jesus’ command to “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt. 5:44) or Paul’s command to “bless your enemies; bless and do not curse” (Rom. 12:14)? I can’t bring myself to agree with those who claim these are compatible ways to pray. It appears that something changed in the first century when both Jesus and Stephen prayed for their enemies (Luke 23:34; Acts 7:60).
- 4) **The imprecatory psalms are profitable for our souls, but we must apply them differently in light of the gospel.** This one requires some unpacking. See below.

#### Seven Qualifiers for Interpretation:

First, we must acknowledge that some kinds of imprecation are acceptable. In Matthew 6:10, Jesus encourages us to pray for God’s kingdom to come, which naturally includes final judgment. In Luke 18:1-8, Jesus exhorts us to cry out day and night for God’s justice. In 1 Corinthians 16:22, Paul pronounces a curse upon all who fail to love Jesus. In Revelation 6:10, martyrs in heaven ask God how long He will delay avenging their blood before the final crackdown. Each of the above scenarios reveals that some level of imprecation is acceptable. What is common to each of them, however, is that they all reference Christ’s return and implied judgment, directly or indirectly. When we discuss the application, we will elaborate on how our assurance of a final reckoning affects our interpretation of imprecatory psalms.

Second, before we criticize the psalmists too sharply, we must step into their shoes. As Derek Kidner says, “The passages on which we may be tempted to sit in judgment have the shocking immediacy of a scream, to startle us into feeling something of the desperation that produced them.” Unless we have experienced the rape, torture, and murder of our family members, we do well *not* to assume the role of armchair quarterback. We can’t expect victims of tragedy to compose themselves, nor should we. These psalms model the way God wishes to relate to us. He doesn’t want the prim-and-proper *you*, dressed up in a bow. He wants the real you—raw, earthy, and unadorned. Our prayer life should reflect this.

Third, the imprecatory psalms model the moral indignation we should feel and often don’t. In the words of R.W. Dale, “It is partly because sin does not provoke our own wrath, that we do not believe that sin provokes the wrath of God.” We cannot passionately love God without passionately opposing evil. C.S. Lewis remarks on the uniqueness of the Psalms in this regard:

*“Such expressions are lacking in pagan literature... [because] the Jews had firmer grasp on right and wrong... If we are to excuse the poets of the Psalms on the grounds that they were not Christians, we ought to be able to point to the same sort of thing and worse in pagan authors... I can find in them lasciviousness, much brutal, insensibility, cold cruelties taken for granted, but not this fury or luxury of hatred. One’s first impression is that the Jews were much more vindictive and vitriolic than the pagans.”*

It’s true that Jewish literature was more “vindictive and vitriolic” than that of the pagans—but why? Because the pagans had no morals. They glorified sex and violence, not righteousness. Sounds familiar, doesn’t it? A society that tolerates everything, but holiness is wicked indeed. Our lack of moral outrage reveals not health but sickness.

Fourth, the imprecatory psalms exhibit faith. Unlike the “self-avenger” of Psalm 8:2, David entrusts vengeance to God and seeks it on behalf of all God’s people. In other words, David seeks vengeance not *by* himself or *for* himself (alone) but rather *by* God and *for* God’s people. On that note, David displays tremendous grace toward Saul, who often sought to kill him and whom David repeatedly spared.

Fifth, the imprecatory psalms were conditional. As noted below, Jeremiah 18:7-10 teaches that anyone who repents will evade prophetically pronounced curses. Paul’s quotation in Romans 11:9-10 of Psalm 69:22-23 assumes this. After linking the curse to unrepentant Jews, Paul immediately holds out hope that the Jews will repent and

experience blessing. Every curse uttered by a Psalmist assumed persistent rebellion against God. To cease rebelling is to sidestep the curse. The curses were conditional.

Sixth, Paul's quotation in Romans 11:9-10 validates that the imprecatory psalms belong to holy Scripture in just the same manner as any other God-breathed jot or tittle. Other imprecations quoted in the New Testament occur in Acts 1:20, which references Pss. 69:25 and 109:8.

Seventh, the imprecatory psalms are theocentric. That is, they focus on God's glory and fame. By judging the wicked and vindicating the righteous, God manifests His glory. Psalm 83:17-18: *"Let them be put to shame and dismayed forever; let them perish in disgrace, **that they may know that you alone, whose name is the LORD, are the Most High over all the earth.**"* When God punished the wicked and vindicated the righteous, Israel would shine like a light to the nations.

Despite these qualifiers, for the following reasons, we cannot apply imprecatory psalms in precisely the same way that ancient Israelites did.

#### Three Reasons We Must Apply the Imprecatory Psalms Differently than in OT times:

##### **Reason #1: We have a clearer understanding of final judgment.**

The New Testament teaches that there is an afterlife, and the wicked will pay a stern penalty, which Christ will enforce upon His return. The Old Testament teaches this clearly in Daniel 12:2 and a few other passages, but Jews of David's time were mostly ignorant of a final day of reckoning and afterlife. Imagine a world where you witness wealthy, comfortable oppressors dying at a good old age while the righteous are killed in their prime. Of course, this happens today, but we at least have confidence that Jesus will return to set it all right. The Psalmists knew this hazily, if at all. Without the confidence of an eschatological day of reckoning, Psalmists cried out to see judgment *in this life*. The New Testament, in contrast, zooms in on the final judgment. We need not feel the same urgency for justice because we know God will pay back evil perfectly, even if they escape justice in this life (cf. 1 Tim. 5:24).

##### **Reason #2: We live in the year of the Lord's favor.**

When Jesus preached in Nazareth, He opened the scroll to Isaiah 61, read a portion, and said, "Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21). Interestingly, Jesus finished His reading of Isaiah 61 by cutting off a verse, mid-sentence. The part He cut out is instructive.

The verse says that God's Spirit rested upon the Messiah "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God" (Isa. 61:2). A year of favor; a day of vengeance. A long stretch of grace but a brief, decisive judgment. Jesus affirmed that the age of grace had been fulfilled in His earthly ministry, but He left off the part about vengeance. Why? Because that part had not been "fulfilled in your hearing." Jesus inaugurated a new age. If we feel any urgency, it should not be toward vengeance, like the Psalmists. They did not live in the era of glad tidings. We do. If anything, we should feel urgency to proclaim—and practice—forgiveness.

##### **Reason #3: We comprise the multinational church, not the theocratic nation of Israel.**

God commanded Israel to vanquish her enemies. Bruce Waltke remarks, "The earthly king asks no more from the heavenly king than the latter asked of him. That is, God told the king to deliver the oppressed and punish the oppressor. The king is asking no more of God than God asked of him."

But now the situation has changed. God no longer commands us to establish His kingdom by supplanting human enemies. In that former era, it was only sensible for Israel to pray for victory over oppressive regimes. Now, however, the church—what Peter calls a "holy nation" (1 Pet. 2:9)—is multinational. God's "portion" is no longer just Israel but all nations (cf. Deut. 32:8-9; Matt. 28:18). The "weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy [demonic] strongholds" (2 Cor. 10:4). In this new gospel era, God has more clearly distinguished between church and state. God entrusts vengeance to the state—"an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer" (Rom. 13:4). To the church, He assigns "the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:18).

#### Seven Ways We Can Apply the Imprecatory Psalms Today:

- 1) **Pray for justice.** Do this in a way that focuses not on personal vengeance but on stopping the oppressor and comforting the oppressed.
- 2) **Pray with raw emotion.** Don't dress up your prayers. Dress them down. God wants a friendship with the real you, not the "you" you think you should be.

- 3) **Pray for moral indignation.** Most of us have been desensitized by the immoral air we breathe. We are outraged by slow service at a restaurant but not the oppression of the poor (of which we are too often ignorant), like the Psalmists.
- 4) **Pray the imprecatory psalms against your spiritual enemies.** The New Testament provides greater insight into "the enemy behind the enemy." Since God will never save fallen angels (2 Pet. 2:4; Heb. 2:16), it is safe to pray for God to crush them beneath our feet (cf. Rom. 16:20).
- 5) **Leave room for God's wrath.** If the Psalmists actively pleaded for God to pour out judgment, the New Testament commands us to passively leave space for it (Rom. 12:19). We do this by refusing to avenge, forgiving our enemies, and waiting for God to enforce perfect justice.
- 6) **Proclaim the good news.** A new day has dawned since Psalmists pronounced curses on their enemies. Because of Jesus, we live in the age of glad tidings. We should proclaim grace as urgently as the Psalmists pronounced judgment.
- 7) **Study the imprecatory psalms.** They are just as profitable for our souls as any other portion of the Bible. Like all Scripture, however, we must read it in light of the age in which we live. Just like we don't sacrifice bulls and goats because of Jesus, neither should we curse our enemies because of Jesus. Nevertheless, we glean much from the "cursing psalms."

In conclusion, the imprecatory psalms are profitable for doctrine, but we must apply them differently in light of the gospel.