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The God of the Universe and I

A Devotional Study of Psalm 139

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ONE must grow up with this psalm to get into the mood of the psalmist and to learn to pray with him. How vividly we remember the first time we read this psalm alone as a child that had just learned to read! What terror it struck into the heart! For a long time this psalm was avoided. Later, much later, when this psalm was encountered again, the terror had all gone. Trust, security, and assurance had taken its place. In the family circle it became known as the "birthday psalm" and is the prayer for that day.

I

HE KNOWS ME ALTOGETHER

(Vv. 1-6)

In moments when we are alone with our thoughts, we will sooner or later come to realize how utterly alone we are, how pathetically alone we must walk through this life. It is a lonely, solitary walk. You may have a long train of friends and yet have no one who understands you, no one to whom you can unburden your heart, no one who can feel with you the infirmity or the handicap which causes you no end of suffering. So on you go, all alone. Then comes the day when the heart is more than full of sorrow and all but crushed by the heavy burden. You must find relief. You turn to the best friend, to him who is closest, and whom you can trust. Anxiously you watch for the right moment to begin to pour out your heart to him, and you do. But soon you are stunned as you notice that his thoughts are wandering and that he does not hear what you are saying to him. An invisible barrier rises between you and him. You cannot go on. Disappointed you come away with a deeper sorrow and a heavier burden than you had when you came. After all, each one of us is like a prisoner in solitary confinement in a prison house. The one inmate cannot see into the cell of the other. Each one is shut in with himself and can hardly communicate with the next one by tapping on the intervening wall.

If it is our fate that we must walk through life solitary and alone, then why do we not simply resign ourselves to this situation and submit to it? Why are we not ready to go on, proudly, alone? Why not? The reason is that no matter how earnestly we try, we cannot overcome the yearning and longing for another soul who understands us, whom we can tell what we are really suffering. We need someone with whom we can share our joys, to make them the fuller, when we are happy. We need someone with whom we can share our sorrows, to lighten them, when we are sad. This need for an understanding, friendly soul is indeed deeply seated in our nature. We find it also in the perfect Man, for also in this respect our Brother, Jesus, "was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15). Think of Him in that awful and horrible hour of suffering in the Garden! Again and again He leaves His praying to look for some understanding soul, each time to find the only men near, sleeping.

Perhaps this explains why the thought of God's omniscience does not crush the psalmist, nor us as we pray this psalm. We are heartened and inspired by the thought that there is Someone who does understand us sympathetically. Throughout this prayer, except for a few moments, there are but two beings in the whole universe, God and the psalmist. There is only God and I when I pray it. "Omniscience" can be such a majestically formal, such an impersonal word, when we think of it, as we usually do, as referring to the relation of God to the universe. When we think of it thus, our thoughts go on a flight to the outskirts of the universe and we are left alone, unmoved, and cold. But for the psalmist "omniscience" has warmth and something personal in it, for he thinks of it as God's relation to him as an individual.

All pomp and formality is gone and has given way to an intimacy made possible only by the Lord who "has searched me and known me." God knows the individual soul intimately and completely, for He knows the whole man in all of his activity and in every moment of repose. "Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising," the psalmist prays. He knows also the inner life, in all its phases, the thoughts and the will. "Thoughts . . . paths . . . ways," the psalmist says. God knows me so thoroughly that before the word, which reveals so much about my inner life, has

shaped itself on my tongue, before it is launched, God knows all its secret history. He knows all about my life, that which lies behind and before me. God is the One who knows me altogether.

Some are terrified by this psalm; why not I? The Father has drawn me to the Son. In the face of Jesus Christ I see the glory of God and know that He is gracious, kind, and forgiving. This psalm is a prayer of trust. This God knows me altogether, knows all my weaknesses and defects. He knows all my needs. He will send into my life both the sweet things and the bitter, the bright days and the dark. He knows I need them both. The one I need to keep me from becoming self-confident and to drive me the deeper into His arms, the other I need to take some of the sting out of the former and to catch my breath. God knows me and searches me. He is my best Friend.

In the presence of such a God we can only fall down on our knees, worship Him and adore Him, and cry out with the psalmist: "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain to it."

II

HE IS WITH ME AND UPHOLDS ME

(Vv. 7-12)

An astronomer who has something to say to us about God's complete sovereignty in the universe, would take out his measuring stick and speak of thousands or even millions of light years to impress us with the immensity of God's creation. What he would say would move God far away and would leave us quite cold. We could at best get only the vaguest idea of the vast dimensions of which he is talking. A geologist would do a little better. He would take us out west, up some great canyon, and point out to us an immense anticline. This tells of tremendous forces which have operated in the past when our planet took shape. A Jew, to magnify the Lord, would tell of the march of the six hundred thousand, exclusive of women and children, through the Red Sea. Job, to impress us with the absolute sovereignty of God, would tell as he does in the twenty-sixth chapter, of "stretching out the north," of "binding up the water in thick clouds," of "compassing the water with boundaries," and of "dividing the seas." Like the astronomer

he says: "He hath garnished the heavens," and then concludes this chapter by saying, "You have seen nothing as yet. You ought to see the thunder of His power." A historian would demonstrate God's absolute sovereignty by pointing to the great events in history, to "world empires arising from the ocean of history," only to "collapse back in impotence to make room for other world powers." Such instances of God's omnipotence certainly seem to us to be the most impressive. To demonstrate God's power and rule in the universe, Jesus, however, would pick up a dead sparrow, which had fallen to the ground without anyone noticing it, and say: "Not one of them is forgotten before God." Or He might flick a hair off your coat and say: "The very hairs on your head are all numbered."

The smallest and the most trivial things that happen here on earth are the most striking illustrations of the Father's power. If the God of the universe is interested in these things, then I have every reason to believe that He is also interested in me. Think of the universe, think of it as expansive, as mysterious, as manifold, and as varied in all its elements and parts as you please: it is all in God's hand. This is marvelous indeed, but the thought that fills my heart with glad wonder and brings God close to me is the assurance that He is interested in me as an individual. The God of the universe is my God. He is not far from me. His hand is on me no matter where I find myself in the universe. His hand touches me no matter what the circumstances around me may be. That is the thought the psalmist lays on our hearts.

"Whither shall I go from Thy Spirit? Or whither shall I flee from Thy presence?" Is David actually thinking of flight, or is he merely supposing the case? The latter is consistent with the rest of the psalm. He tours the universe in his vain flight and imagines himself reaching its outskirts and is stunned to find God there. He tries the heights, the heavens. Up he goes in his flight, on and on, up past the heaven, past the heaven of heaven, to the highest heaven (2 Chron. 6:18; Luke 2:14). God is there and fills it all. Then down he goes, and down, to the land of the dead; but the divine presence is always near and fills all the dim intervening spaces. David does not give up easily. "If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there shall Thy hand lead me, and Thy right hand shall hold me."

David now tries speed to escape the divine Presence. Though he ride the dawn breaking into day as it flashes along from the east to the farthest boundary of the Mediterranean, and then on and on to the west, to the land of mystery: the hand of his God is upon him and upholds him. Flight from the Presence is futile, David concludes. Perhaps concealment will succeed. "If I say: Surely the darkness shall cover me; even the night shall be light about me. Yea, the darkness hideth not from Thee; but the night shineth as the day; the darkness and the light are both alike to Thee." The thought of hiding from God does not take the psalmist very far. It is impossible to associate darkness with the God who covers himself with light as with a garment (Ps. 104:2; Job 36:30 RSV), "who commanded the light to shine out of darkness" (2 Cor. 4:6), in the presence of this ineffable light, darkness and light, as we men know them, "are both alike." Before that Glory all else is dark, it is so bright.

The undertone of this whole stanza is clearly sounded in verse 10, and may well be repeated after each change of scene: "Even there shall Thy hand lead me, and Thy right hand shall hold me." These words in this setting sound the grand theme of the Bible: Though man has fallen into sin, he has not fallen out of the hand of God. Man may be lost, but he is not hopelessly lost. He has not fallen beyond the reach of God's grace and mercy and His redeeming, saving power.

III

HE CREATED ME (Vv. 13-18 RSV)

The mysteries of conception and birth no longer overawe our modern man. Science has swept away the awful and the mysterious. Everything can be explained by the laws of mechanics and by cause and effect. Modern man can no longer be mystified. Nature holds no surprises for him. Everything has become transparent. With hardly a stir of emotion in his heart he lays open the parts as he probes and searches for nature's secrets, and if he experiences any thrill at all, it is because he has discovered some detail which no one has noticed before. The thought that "in Him we live and move and are" seldom, if ever, comes to mind as the man of today

is absorbed by his researches and his investigations. Even in the thinking of many a Christian of today, God is so far removed from the many little and ordinary things which happen all around us every day, that a sort of Christian atheism has developed, as the German physicist Werner Heisenberg once put it.

Now listen to David: "For Thou didst form my inward parts, Thou didst knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise Thee, for Thou art fearful and wonderful. Wonderful are Thy works! Thou knowest me right well; my frame was not hidden from Thee when I was being made in secret, intricately wrought in the depths of the earth. Thy eyes beheld my unformed substance. . . ." The mysteries of conception and birth strike the psalmist's imagination. They are to him the direct result of divine Power. With devout awe and delicately he touches upon these mysteries by the use of a picture. Thus he casts a veil over the whole process so that human parents drop completely out of sight before the clear view he gives of the divine Creator, as He goes about His work.

David thinks of the divine Artisan as a weaver or knitter of an intricate design: "For Thou didst form my inward parts. Thou didst knit me together in my mother's womb." God's designs are anything but transparent. We cannot follow as He develops them, but the little glimpses we do get here and there are enough to fill us with awe and wonder. Thus it is with David. He cannot contemplate his own frame without being overawed. He is overcome by the thought that the Creator of the universe is also His personal Creator, that He designed and fashioned every part into a mysterious whole. So David breaks forth with a prayer of adoration and praise and cries: "I praise Thee, for Thou art fearful and wonderful. Wonderful are Thy works!"

But within the moment he is again in the midst of his contemplation and is absorbed by it. "Thou knowest me right well; my frame was not hidden from Thee when I was being made in secret, intricately wrought in the depths of the earth. Thy eyes beheld my unformed substance. . . ." As David resumes his contemplation, he takes a somewhat different viewpoint than before. He had been contemplating the completed David, as he is when he sings this psalm. "I am Thy wonderful work," he had cried out. Now he is thinking of the origin of his being, when he became a reality,

a thought of God, as yet without material substance. However dark and puzzling some of the language is which he here employs, the psalmist leaves no doubt as to who it is that planned his being, and was in attendance as material substance and soul were "intricately wrought" and "knit together" into one being, a man, a thought of God become a creature of the earth. "Oh, the wonder of it!" David thinks, "Every moment of my life was real already then!" "In Thy book were written every one of the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them." Here the psalmist is thinking not so much of a certain life span which has been allotted to him by divine Providence, but that his life has been planned. It has been given a pattern. It has been written in the "book" before ever there was any calendar or time.

It is not a mere coincidence that I am here and you are there, and that tomorrow or the day after someone else has taken our place. Long, long ago before there was any angel or man, or blade of grass or drop of dew, God had brought us to this present moment to bestow a blessing upon us. If we are not self-willed, but trustingly lay our hand in His, every moment of life will be a moment of blessing, no matter how much the trends of the time may seem to push us around or hostile forces may seem to turn upon us. Even the dark and the somber things will turn out to be our friends.

Now the poet gathers together and crowns all his previous contemplation by the consideration that the God of the universe has great thoughts or purposes affecting him individually. That assurance makes omniscience and omnipresence joys, not terrors. "How precious to me are Thy thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! If I would count them, they are more than the sand. When I awake, I am still with Thee."

David uses a word for "precious" which conveys also the idea of "weighty." He would weigh the thoughts of God toward him. But look for a balance, no matter how great its capacity, it is always overtaxed by just one thought of God. He gives this up. He tries counting these "precious thoughts," but soon he concludes that while the grains of sand on the shore are numbered the thoughts of God are without number. He makes no other attempt, but seeking shelter the deeper and the more securely in the arms of his God, he clutches the blessing which has accrued to him through such

contemplation of the God of the universe and cries out like a child awakening in its mother's arms: "When I awake, I am still with Thee!"

The infinite God of the universe is apprehended by faith. "I am still with Thee — still with Thee — evermore with Thee."

IV

HE IS THE GOD OF MY SALVATION

(Vv. 19-24)

In this psalm we have the loftiest conception of the space-filling presence of the God of the universe to be found anywhere, followed immediately by language which denotes the closest personal familiarity with the finite soul. Up to the beginning of this stanza there have been only two beings in the whole universe, God and the psalmist. At this point, however, an intruder appears. Abruptly the quiet contemplative mood of the psalmist breaks off, and he sends out an impassioned cry of hatred against evil and its agents.

Can we explain this sudden change of mood? Perhaps. We let our thoughts go back to Paradise, when man lived in a state of perfect blessedness which we cannot describe. David has already exhausted conceptual expression in picturing the present blessedness. Language fails when we try to describe the perfect relation between God and man as it once existed. It would require "unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter" (2 Cor. 12:4), to tell of that perfect bliss. Granted that we could apprehend somewhat that blessedness in our present weak state, we should be overwhelmed by the thrill and emotion which would overcome us (1 Cor. 15:50). It was the perfect relation between the God of the universe and the individual. But Satan, the intruder, appeared. Brazen, impudent, uninvited he came into Paradise, stepped between God and man, and disrupted the blessed relation. This blessed relation with God has been re-established through Christ. But Satan is still the intruder. He is busy even today in his attempts to destroy the present blessedness of the believer before it is perfected and so placed beyond his reach and power.

When our Brother Jesus, the Second Adam, appeared in the flesh and had begun His public office, Satan tried over and over again to destroy the blessed relation between Him and the Father

and to break down His perfect obedience. On the occasion of the Temptation, under the guidance of the Spirit (Matt. 4:1), our Champion deliberately sought out Satan to demonstrate once and for all that He was Master over the powers of darkness. Here Satan was defeated but not subdued, nor did he become less brazen and less impudent. Throughout His earthly life the Christ was assailed by Satan (Heb. 2:18). During His retirement at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus spoke of His suffering and death in an unmistakable manner for the first time, as far as we know. It was an intimate group He had gathered there. Uninvited, Satan had joined the group to divert Jesus from the road to the Cross. Satan had no permission to speak here, but Peter became his mouthpiece when he cried out: "Be it far from Thee, Lord: this shall not be unto Thee!" (Matt. 16:22.) And again, still brazen and uninvited, Satan climbed the Mount of the Transfiguration together with Jesus, Peter, James, and John. Satan was there when Jesus spoke of His "decease to be accomplished at Jerusalem" with Moses and Elias in glory. Again Satan had no leave to speak, but he put his words into Peter's mouth to divert the Savior from the road to the Cross. Peter cried out: "Why go down and die? It is good to be here in glory. Let us make three tabernacles." Of course, Satan was in the Garden. That was the hour of darkness. That was Satan's hour. Again he tried to break the obedience unto the Cross by putting a sword into Peter's hand and into the hands of some of his companions (Luke 22:49; John 18:11). In all these attempts Satan failed. Thank God!

Satan is still the intruder. Brazenly he forces his presence upon us, even in the most private and sacred moments. When we enter the closet to pray, we can never shut the door quickly enough nor securely enough to exclude him. He would always stand between God and us. He is so shamelessly arrogant that he invades our death chamber and makes a final desperate attempt to intrude, when body and soul are all but torn asunder.

We come back to our psalm. David is completely absorbed by his meditation. The universe, everything has dropped away. He and his God are all alone. David is moved with awe and wonder and adoration. This is intolerable to Satan. Rudely he intrudes. It may be a thought, or the remembrance of something evil, or a needling of the conscience which he uses. Satan has no end of

devices which he can employ. Whatever it was that he resorted to here, he succeeded in interrupting the meditation, if but for a few moments. But Satan underestimated David. This time David is alert. He recognizes the old evil Foe. David sees that the affront is really meant for his God. Now we can somewhat understand this abrupt and startling change of mood and this impassioned cry of hatred against Satan and his cohorts. "Surely Thou wilt slay the wicked, O God! Depart from me therefore, ye bloody men! For they speak against Thee wickedly, and Thine enemies take Thy name in vain. Do I not hate them, O Lord, that hate Thee? And am not I grieved with those that rise up against Thee? I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them mine enemies."

Some have said that this hatred is unchristian. But it is not directed against any person as such; instead, it is directed against the agents of Satan and the evil which they perpetrate. This is spoken in the same spirit in which Christ prayed: "I pray not for the world." It is the "Thy will be done." It is a protestation against evil and evil counsel and will.

The lesson taught here for Christian living is expressed best by the hymn *Mache dich, mein Geist, bereit*.

Rise, my soul, to watch and pray,
 From thy sleep awaken;
 Be not by the evil day
 Unawares o'ertaken.
 For the Foe,
 Well we know,
 Oft his harvest reapeth
 While the Christian sleepeth.

The Foe is there, even when we pray, or when we think we are doing God a service, as was the case with Peter on the Mount. Sometimes we pray for the release of a loved one from some lingering sickness, when really we have been anxious ourselves to be freed from the burden of constant care he requires of us. He lingers on and on. Then the day comes, as some alert Christians have confessed, that we suddenly realize that we have been too anxious to have *our* cross and *our* burden removed. Shamefacedly we make confession of our self-pity and ask for cheerful patience. Now the release comes for the suffering one, and angels bear the soul home.

David's outburst of righteous indignation does not last long. He leaves the evil ones to God. God will deal with them. And as abruptly as he had left the first mood, he returns to it and prays to the God of the universe: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my thoughts; and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." David began this psalm: "Lord, Thou hast known me and searched me." He ends it by asking for that searching. This is not a challenge to the all-knowing God to find wickedness where there is none, but a prayer for help in cleaning away the forgotten sins, and the unknown sins, which David knows are there (Ps. 19:12). This is the hardest prayer for man to pray. It must be all or nothing. Before God there dare not be the slightest reservation, for this is complete rebellion against God. All or nothing — a complete confession is the prerequisite. If I am willing that "God search me and know my heart, try me and know my thoughts, and see if there be any wicked way in me," then the God of the universe will also be the God of my salvation. Then I may lay my hand in His. Then will He lead me in the way everlasting.

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CORRECTION

In the article "John Gerhard on Philosophy in Theology" in the September issue, pages 721—724, the terms *κατασκολαστικός* and *ἀνασκολαστικός* should be corrected to read *κατασκευαστικός* and *ἀνασκευαστικός*.