

INTERLUDE

Psalm 139

Trials are interesting experiences – not the “trials and tribulations” trials, but the “courtroom drama” type. I am writing this lesson after a 3-week trial in San Antonio, Texas where I represented the family of Alfonso Lopez against the Caterpillar Company. The trial, like most every other one in my experience, was intense and almost all consuming.

For three weeks, almost 20 hours a day (save a brief respite over each weekend) was spent working. The chore for our team was to take complicated matters and explain them in a convincing fashion to a jury of 12 citizens. To do that, we first had to learn and understand the difficult issues. There were issues of computer science, electrical engineering and science, mechanical engineering, and physics. There were experts in those areas, and also biomechanical engineering, neurosurgery, rehabilitation sciences and vocation services. Added to that were difficulties of working with translators for clients who were not fully conversant in English.

Added to those elements are the legal issues and difficulties always encountered within the rules of procedure and court. A judge presides over those issues, and her temperament and knowledge are unknowns that gradually reveal themselves as the trial goes on. Jostling and fighting over these issues before the judge are the lawyers for the other side. They, like all lawyers, are looking to expose any weakness, trying to exploit any opening, and probing for any advantage before the judge or jury.

The absence of home-life, and its stability and familiarity magnify these intense pressures. The world is excluded, as the focus becomes only the courtroom, the working rooms of the hotel and the two-block walk between the two. Every moment is spent trying to maximize the chances of winning for your clients. But even the winning is not the final picture. For every lawyer knows that sets of appellate judges, often with their own agendas, will be pouring over the case on appeal looking for any word slip or any move that might remove a victory and substitute a defeat.

Defeat, of course, means emotional loss, professional humiliation (on high exposure trials, all peers and competitors watch carefully), economic setbacks, and an overwhelming feeling of dejection. But all those feelings and results pale in comparison to the devastation of knowing you failed your clients. In our case, the Lopez family was one of wonderful people (father, mother and daughter) whose lives had already been irrevocably changed by the paralysis from the waist down of Alfonso, the breadwinner for the family. Knowing their fate and future are in your hands serves as the greatest motivator of all.

Biblical-literacy.com

All that weighs upon the hungry, fatigued, and lonely lawyer. I found myself in that position many times over the last three weeks. One time this last week I sat in my room for a brief ten minutes of quiet time before our Lord before I went over to struggle against the big expert witness for the other side. This was a man who had spent the better part of the prior day testifying that our client was at fault for the injuries.

The “expert” had been a University Professor in Engineering and Physics for over three decades. He had presented complicated formulas that set out g-forces, formulas for computing rotational momentum, vertical and horizontal motion, metallurgical stresses, and more. I’m still not sure how much of that anyone understood, but Steve Taylor had spent the better part of the night trying to explain the physics to me so that I could have some extra tools for cross examining the witness to expose his flawed testimony.

So I decided my ten minutes would be spent prayerfully before the Lord with Psalm 139 as my prayer partner. The time before the Lord with the psalm was the prescription for my ailments! It was a super vitamin of peace that charged my soul, heart and mind for that day. It was such a great boost that it was my resource again the next two mornings!

With this freshness, we take a hiatus this week from Paul’s theology to consider this Psalm together.

PSALM 139

1O LORD, you have searched me and known me!
2You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from afar.
3You search out my path and my lying down
and are acquainted with all my ways.
4Even before a word is on my tongue,
behold, O LORD, you know it altogether.
5You 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!
9If I take the wings of the morning
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
10even 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!

THE HEBREW

At the outset, I should note that I am no Hebrew scholar! I took a degree in Hebrew/Greek with about 4 years of study in Hebrew. I even took a course in translating the Psalms. In other words, I know enough Hebrew to know that I am no Hebrew scholar! Additionally I am acutely aware of how much Hebrew I have forgotten over the intervening 29 years!

With that warning, however, I must say that the Hebrew I do understand has added immensely to the richness of this Psalm in my private meditations. So I share with you some of the Hebrew insight, with the caveat above. This is natural for my

teaching because the Psalm takes its shape for me from the Hebrew studies I had with it many moons ago.

The Psalm is divided into two sections. The first section is one of praise to God the Creator (verses 1-18). The second section is verses 19-24 and they comprise what some scholars call a “supplication.” The Psalms themselves are songs (Heb. *Mizmor*¹) of Hebrew poetry, and there is much to be said about their composition, form, structure, cadence, and the difficulties in adequately translating them. But we save that for our teaching on Biblical Literacy in the coming months, in this lesson, we are going to focus on Psalm 139 without those added considerations. We will direct our focus on the first section of the Psalm.

While we reserve insight on the difficulties of translating Psalms for other lengthier lessons², we must note as we begin exploring this Psalm that a certain ambiguity exists in most every Hebrew poem. The Hebrew language offers a different precision than 21st century English. The Hebrew verbs are not as precise in tense, and many of the words have optional meanings.

The beauty of this ambiguity is that it gives a fuller range of meaning for the Psalms. What might seem to be a less precise focus of understanding is actually a source of the Psalms’ blessings. We can more readily see many aspects of our lives and needs expressed in the verses. We will see this as we explore the multiple facets of meaning in this Psalm.

GOD’S KNOWLEDGE (139:1-6)

O LORD, you have searched me and known me! (1)

“Yahweh” – LORD – This special Hebrew word, the “name” of God as spoken to Moses, is the first word in Psalm 139.³ This Psalm of personal reflection and deep

¹ *Mizmor* is found at the start of 57 Psalms. The Rabbinic literature refers to each Psalm as a *mizmor*. Scholars are not in full agreement on the meaning and usage of the word because the word is found nowhere else in the Bible. If the word is not “song” proper, it at least means “something sung” as the word is formed from *zamer* (“to sing”).

² In this lesson we will add a few more complicated matters for the sake of precision, but those additions will be mainly in footnotes.

³ In some English translations, The Psalm begins with the words “To the Choirmaster. A Psalm of David.” That introduction is not actually a part of the Psalm itself. It is a heading that was added later to 73 different Psalms. The Hebrew does not necessarily mean that David wrote the Psalm.

theological understanding begins with the most holy name of God. For God is the focus of the Psalm and the psalmist.

This was worth me stopping in my meditation this week. In the midst of the craziness of trial, the flurry of emotions and effort, and the absence of anything normal in life, just to stop and slowly register God and be reminded that he has chosen to reveal himself personally, even to the point of giving Moses (and us) his “name,” gave a moment of respite and eternal focus to the day and the trial effort.

That the eternal and personal God “searched me” and “knew me” was my next step of focus. God has “searched” me. These verbs are Hebrew past tenses that can carry two meanings. They can mean that God searched (or examined) me and knew me from time before (an “actual past”). It can also mean that God always searches (examines) and knows me (a “continuous action”). With both of these comes a reassurance that in the midst of whatever my day holds, the God who chose to reveal himself to me is not caught unaware. He is not busy somewhere else and inattentive to my situation. I am, and have been, in his thoughts and considerations.

*You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from afar. (2)*

How much does God know of my day? God knows when I sit down and when I stand up. More than that, the Hebrew offers another thought as well. God knows not just the times when I sit or stand, but he knows the movements with each. In other words, God was aware of my sitting to have quiet time. He was aware that I would be arising shortly and walking to the courthouse.

This was especially poignant to me, because trial is a time of sitting and standing, standing and sitting, sitting and standing. You stand when the judge enters, then you sit. Then you stand when the jury enters, then you sit. You stand to examine a witness, and then you sit. You stand to make objections then you sit. On and on, you alternate during the day.

All the time I am sitting and standing, the personal God understands my thoughts/ideas from afar. This may refer to the fact that God sitting enthroned above the heavens (*afar* – or “far off”) is not distant from what is in my brain and heart. He knew what I was planning for the day. He knew the worries I had and the frustrations I expected. I might not see God before me, but my mind was never away from him!

Rather the Hebrew construction means that the Psalm is inspired by David, dedicated to David, or perhaps written by David.

*You search out my path and my lying down
and are acquainted with all my ways. (3)*

I love the Hebrew word for “search.” It is *zerita* and comes from the noun *zeret*. The noun means your pinkie finger!⁴ In Psalm 139, it means, “to measure out.” It is as if God has taken his little finger and measured out the path I walk. This gives me a wonderful sense of peace as I embark on a walk that I have no knowledge of where it leads. The end of the path is unknown to me, but not God. He not only knows the end, he has measured it out with his little finger! God not only measures the path, but he is “acquainted” (he “oversees”) all my ways. Chewing this over, I was ready to face my day, knowing who had it all measured out!

*Even before a word is on my tongue,
behold, O LORD, you know it altogether. (4)*

This was important! I was headed to my full day of “talking” and needed to know that my words were not going to surprise the Lord! I had worked hard through the night to know the things I needed to know; to form the questions I needed to ask, and structure the arguments I needed to make. I wanted the Lord’s blessings on what I said. I wanted integrity in my every expression. Knowing that God was fully aware, not only gave me a peace, but also an admonition to be careful! The lawyer is always faced with the temptation to manipulate words for the sake of “winning.” Such a mistake would not slip by the Lord’s attention, but even more so, such a mistake was not needed. My God of truth knew my words and my path. I wanted it to be the path and words he would choose for me, not those of my own agenda!

*You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me. (5)*

You “hem me in.” God places a siege or hedge around me. He encompasses me on all sides. I cannot go forward or backward without God’s holy hand upon me. That is where I want to be! Heaven forbid (literally) that I should ever seek to walk away from the hedge of protection that God provides his children.

In our case, we had several days of rain. The two-block walk to the courthouse necessitated an umbrella on one day in particular. The umbrella provided

⁴ A minority opinion among scholars traces the word *zerita* to a root meaning “surrounded” (*zevar*) or yet another root meaning “selected” (*zoreh*).

wonderful coverage. With this Psalm before me, I could not help but think how foolish it would be to try and walk without the protection afforded by the umbrella from the rain, or afforded by God from everything!

*Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is high; I cannot attain it. (6)*

I must admit that as I chewed on this Psalm, thinking through each word and phrase in prayer, I reached verse six both mentally and spiritually at the same time I reached it reading. In other words, I was personally stunned at my inability to truly fathom the significance of what I had been reading. It was just as I was realizing my limitation of comprehension that I read verse six. I had to chuckle out loud.

To the psalmist, this knowledge of God's protection, and even more so, of God's knowledge, was beyond his reach. It was as if it were in a high stronghold, which he cannot reach or conquer.⁵ That was me! I knew I could not fathom what God had in store. Nor could I understand his full protection. But in faith, I knew it was there. Like Mary being told of her pregnancy by the Holy Spirit, I could dare to believe the unbelievable: That God took personal interest in my day, each step and each word.

GOD'S REACH (139:7-12)

*Where shall I go from your Spirit?
Or where shall I flee from your presence? (7)*

This question signals it expects a negative answer. There is not any place where I would go, or could go, where God's Spirit, his Breath, would not be found. I had not left God in Houston, nor would I leave him in the hotel, once I closed the Bible and my quiet time ceased. God was ever present. Yahweh "is." Period. Everywhere. I could leave my room and head to court, but I was not alone. I was missing my family back in Houston, but I was not alone. I was standing in front of strangers seeking justice for my clients, but I was not alone!

*If I ascend to heaven, you are there!
If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! (8)*

⁵ Kook, Mosad, The Bible: Psalms with the Jerusalem Commentary (Jerusalem: Kook 2003) Vol. 3 at 402.

If I were to climb into heaven itself, I would find God. Of course, one might expect God in his dwelling place. But the psalmist then adds, even if I were to go to the underworld, God would be there. The English Standard Version misses out a bit of the Hebrew emphasis. The Hebrew has the idea of surprise, as if to say, “You are *even there!*” Now admittedly, I had no plans to die that day; however, that is not to say that I did not feel like dying! Add to that some people who would even be more amazed to find God in a courthouse!

*If I take the wings of the morning
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me. (9-10)*

There are some poetic questions about exactly how to understand the Psalm at this point. The suggestion is that going as far east as possible (where the sun rises each morning) and riding the sun to the furthest west (where the sun sets over the Mediterranean Sea) would not leave the caring hand and protection of the Lord. For me the meaning was clear: God had made it to San Antonio, even before me! Not only that, but his hand was there to lead me and to hold me. God’s guidance was right there!

The image is of a father holding the hand of his young son with his right hand while showing him the path with his left. That is the God I had in this time of need!

*If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light about me be night,"
even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you. (11-12)*

Were I to try to hide from God, were I to find some magical cloak to hide me in darkness, even then God would see me fully as if it were daylight. Now don’t get me wrong, I had no desire to hide from God as I was contemplating this Psalm. Yet it was reassuring to think that if I were trying, I would not be able!

It reminded me of a thought I have had on occasions where we have stayed by the sea. On the seashore, one can hear the constant sound of the waves crashing the shore. I have had times where I have thought, “Can someone turn off that sound for just a bit?” Yet that is the sound of the sea; it is incessant. So with God, even darkness cannot hinder his perfect vision. There is no darkness in our life that he cannot penetrate it fully with his presence and care.

GOD'S WORK (139:13-18)

*For you formed my inward parts;
you knitted me together in my mother's womb. (13)*

Do you ever take personal inventory? Are there times when you wonder if you have what it takes? When you wonder if you can get through the difficulties in front of you? This is a wonderful part of the Psalm because, after singing of God's full knowledge, and after acknowledging his complete presence, the Psalmist gets personal and examines himself. The personal God who knows all, and is all, is the God who formed the psalmist. From inside to out, the Psalmist is what he is because of God's fashioning.

The word for "my inward parts" is actually the Hebrew word for "kidneys" (*kilyotai*)! For the ancient Hebrews, the kidneys were the seat of human thought. Think of Stephen Colbert's insistence on what he knows to be true because his "gut" tells him. The psalmist is speaking in ways that hearken back to verse two where he writes of God knowing his "thoughts" from afar. God formed the part of him that thinks! It was part of God's process of knitting or weaving the psalmist during his mother's pregnancy.

As we face the trials in our lives (literally or figuratively) we need to remember that we are who God made us to be. We have all we need to face those trials and walk through them successfully *in God's sight*. Now God's view of success is not always our view! Part of wisdom is learning to see things God's way instead of seeking to make him see things our way! But an early step in this direction is learning that God has made us with the things we need to be in his plan.

*I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. (14)*

Praise includes thanks. As we realize and grow confident that God has made us, that God has chosen everything from the thoughts of our "kidneys" to the color of our hair, we rightly stop and say, "thank you." We thank and praise God for making us with his awesome wonders. Think through the ways science has taught us about our bodies. God governs not simply a construction of a baby in clay. God actually combines DNA, structurally maneuvering genetic code to see that each of us carry the place in this world we are meant to within his plan. We rightly praise him knowing that his entire plan is no less wonderful.

My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed substance;
(15-16a)

“My frame” could be one’s body (Hebrew *`atzmi*) or could be one’s “essence” (*`otzmi*). Both are equally true. God did not accidentally make anyone. No one accidentally came to be while in the darkness of his or her mother’s womb. Rather, the same God, whose light penetrates darkness, saw and made our essences as well as our bodies. There is a time to stop and look in the mirror and say, “God knew what he was doing!” Now certainly that does not mean that we cannot mess up a good thing. But the same God, who made us, knows of our ability to mess things up. He is always there to work things into the best, taking what he made and restoring it in his plan for his purposes. God is about redemption; a fact since before he made us!

Commentators differ on whether “in the depths of the earth” is a poetic expression of the mother’s womb (the depths of her body) or an expression of belief in the creation of man in the belly of the earth. I opine the former, and understand it accordingly. Regardless, I know that the God who made me did so with open eyes!

By the way, Tolkien fans should take note. The Hebrew for “unformed substance” is *golem*. A bit like the Hobbit character that was transforming into something no longer fully hobbit, *golem* in Hebrew refers to something unfinished, a human not yet fully formed.

*in your book were written, every one of them,
the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.* (16b)

You are famous! You are in a book! God has a book with a whole section dedicated to you! Not only that, but you were famous before you were born! The Psalmist does not probe the mystery of how God could have written all our days before we chose how to live them. That is not his question. The Psalmist simply affirms God’s wisdom over his life. God is never caught unaware with what you face. God knew your days before they came to be. This should add to one’s confidence that God has made them “just right” for the days they have before them.⁶

How precious to me are your thoughts, O God!

⁶ Some scholars see in this verse something a bit less! Some translate the passage as referencing God having recorded the days he would form each organ in the womb.

*How vast is the sum of them!
If I would count them, they are more than the sand.
I awake, and I am still with you. (17-18)*

The ESV loses a bit of the Hebrew emphasis in its translation of this verse. The Psalm begins, “As for me...” (*v’li*). It sets this verse in a contrast with verse two of this Psalm. In verse two, “Yahweh knows ... and discerns our thoughts.” Here it is “As for me,” as I perceive God’s thoughts I see them as “precious” and “vast.” The word for “precious (*yak’ru*) can also mean “deep.” God’s thoughts are indeed, precious and deep. They are “vast,” more numerous than the sand.

This section of the Psalm ends with a verse that sends commentators in several directions: “I awake, and I am still with you.” Some see this as an inference that while thinking of these deep thoughts of God, the psalmist seems as one asleep. Even upon awakening, however, the Psalmist notes he still abides with God. Others see it as tied to the last verse in the sense that as God’s thoughts are so numerous, as one reaches the end of counting (an alternate meaning for “awake”) the end of God’s thoughts would not be reached.

Regardless, in my own meditation, I realize that God is beyond my thoughts. My goal, therefore, is not to figure him out, but rather to figure out how he wishes me to live, and what he wishes me to do. I can make those choices and rest confident that in his thoughts and plans, my life is secure.

CONCLUSION

So for several critical days of trial, I sat in a chair at the San Antonio Westin and took ten minutes of silent reflection on God, praying through this Psalm. I then left and went to court for a day of warring on the grounds of civil justice.

After three weeks of battle the jury went out into deliberations. I did not know what verdict they would reach. But I was at peace knowing God did! It was in his plan and written in the book. I was confident that whether it was good or bad, God had taken it into account and was working his victory for his children in eternity. In *that*, I had, and still have peace! God be praised.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *“You have searched... You know... You discern... You search out... You are acquainted... You know... You hem me in” (Ps. 139:1-6).*

There are many times where we may choose not to think about and consider God. But there is no time where he does not have us in mind. So take a moment and consider that the all-knowing God knows you! Then all your trials, and all your issues become his, and at that point, your world and mine takes on an all-new color.

2. “*Where? Heaven... Sheol...the morning...the sea... darkness...*” (Ps. 139:7-12).

Do you see your need for God? Is there something going on in your life that needs his special presence? If so, rest assured, he is there. You could not hide from God if you tried! Set your cares upon him. He is there to carry them.

3. “*You formed... You knitted... Your works are wonderful... You made... You wove... You saw... You wrote...*” (Ps. 139:13-18).

God is involved in your life. He wrote your days, even before he made you. He made sure that you were made with all you needed to do his plan in your life and follow his leading. There is nothing before you that you are not equipped to do with his help. Embrace the Lord, and walk in his will with confidence. For he is at work in his children “both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” (Yes, even in this interlude, we end the lesson with Paul – Phil. 2:13).