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NO ESCAPE FROM GOD

Psalm 139

By

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Psalms: Lesson 25

No Escape From God Psalm 139

One of the greatest truths in life which we all know, but which we all must come to learn, is that there is *no escape from God*. Like fugitives, we may run, but we cannot ultimately hide from the God who penetrates even the darkness with the gaze of His light. If we manage to dodge Him in this life, we must still stand exposed before Him on that fearful day of judgment. There is no place to hide from God.

Happily, once we give up our flight and allow ourselves to be found by this relentless "Hound of Heaven" (as Francis Thompson described Him in his poem), we discover that His intention is not to harm but to bless us. He formed us even in our mother's womb for His purpose and ordained all of our days before we ever saw the light of day. With David we must exclaim, "How precious also are Your thoughts to me, O God!" (v. 17).

In coming to know Him, we come to know ourselves. In the blinding light of His holiness, we recognize instantly the desperate need we have for inner purity. Since we cannot escape from this all-knowing, all-present, all-wise Creator, we cannot escape from the need for holiness. That is the message of the beautifully-crafted Psalm 139. It's not a generic psalm; it's intensely personal, between David and God (note the frequent "I" & "me"). Thus I want to express its main message and points in the first person singular:

Since I cannot escape from God, I must
commit myself to holiness.

The psalm falls into four stanzas. The first three deal with different attributes of this inescapable God as they relate to the individual: His omniscience (vv. 1-6); His omnipresence (vv. 7-12); and, His omnipotence as the sovereign Creator (vv. 13-18). The final stanza (vv. 19-24) sets forth the inescapable response to the inescapable God: personal holiness.

1. I can't escape God's knowledge of me (139:1-6).

God knows absolutely everything about me! He knows my *actions*. When I sit down and when I get up (v. 2); when I go somewhere and when I lie down (v. 3). He is intimately acquainted with all my ways! He knows my *words*: in fact, He even knows what I am going to say before I say it (v. 4)! He even knows my *thoughts* from afar (v. 2b). Like a caged bird, He's got me surrounded, with His hand upon me (v. 5). There is no escape from His thorough, penetrating knowledge. So David exclaims (v. 6): "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is too high, I cannot attain to it."

The closest we can get to knowing another human being ought to take place in the marriage relationship. As a man and woman live together in that lifelong commitment, they grow to know one another's actions, words, and--to the degree that they openly communicate--thoughts and feelings. The Bible uses the verb "to know" to describe the sexual relationship in marriage (Gen. 4:1). But even so, you can be married for years and still discover new things about your mate. Even the closest human relationships fall short of total knowledge.

In fact, we can't even know ourselves thoroughly. Life is a process of coming to know ourselves. But, as Jeremiah 17:9 says, "The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately wicked; who can understand it?" We can't know our own motives and inner drives apart from God's revealing it to us through His Word. God alone knows us thoroughly. He sees through us.

Your first reaction to that thought is probably, "Where can I run to hide?" It seems to have been David's thought (v. 7). Since the human race fell into sin, that kind of total intimacy has been threatening to every person. Before the fall, Adam and Eve enjoyed open intimacy with God and with one another. They were naked and not ashamed in each other's presence (Gen. 2:25). But as soon as they sinned, they tried to hide from God and they sewed fig leaves to hide their nakedness from one another. We have a longing to know and be known, but only within safe limits. We fear being totally exposed.

But the amazing thing is, this God who knows us so thoroughly, who knows every awful thought we ever have, desires to have a relationship with us. Because of our sin and God's holiness, something had to be done to remove that barrier to our relation-

ship with Him. With the first couple, God performed an object lesson that pointed ahead to His ultimate solution. Their fig leaves were not adequate; God slaughtered an animal and clothed them with its skin, showing them that they could not be restored to fellowship with a holy God without the shedding of blood.

Although the Bible doesn't specify, I believe God slaughtered a lamb and explained to Adam and Eve the coming Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world. Can you imagine their shock at seeing death for the first time as they watched the blood spurt and the animal writhe as its life-blood drained from it? It showed them in a graphic way that God takes sin seriously. It must be paid for through death. But it also showed them that in His grace, God would provide the substitute so that no sinner need be separated from God or pay the penalty for his or her own sin.

Christianity is not following a set of rules or going through a bunch of religious rituals. It is at its heart a personal relationship with the living God who knows you thoroughly. You enter that relationship when you put your trust in the substitute He provided, the Lord Jesus Christ, who paid the penalty for your sin with His death on the cross.

The threat of being known so intimately by God provokes the reaction, "Where can I go to hide?" David pursues that thought in the second stanza:

2. I can't escape God's presence (139:7-12).

Where do you plan to run? Heaven (v. 8)? God is there! The first Soviet cosmonauts irreverently joked that they didn't see God from their spaceship. But God saw them! He is there! Do you want to escape God in the place of the dead (Sheol)? He's there, too! Do you want to head east ("wings of the dawn," v. 9) or west ("remotest part of the sea")? You won't dodge God (v. 10)! You can hide in the dark, but God is light and He will find you out (vv. 11-12). Since God is everywhere, you can't get away from Him. Again, David is intensely personal about it: God isn't just everywhere; everywhere I go, He lays hold of me (v. 10)!

A college student fancied himself to be a ladies' man. One evening the phone rang. Picking up the receiver, he murmured in a

low, sexy voice, "Talk to me, baby" Suddenly he flushed bright red. He said weakly, "Oh, hi, Mom" (*Reader's Digest* [6/84], p. 32).

A mother's presence, even over the phone, has a way of straightening out wrong behavior! How much more would we live uprightly if we constantly kept in mind that God is present with us everywhere we go!

3. I can't escape God's power and sovereignty (139:13-18).

The thought that darkness doesn't hide us from God leads David to consider that God formed him in his mother's womb. Though hidden from human eyes in that day before sonograms, David was not hidden from God's eyes (v. 16). And not only did God make me through His creative power, but also He ordained all of my days before any of them came into being (v. 16)! Considering how fearfully and wonderfully we are made should cause us to break forth in thanksgiving to God (v. 14).

Augustine observed, "Men go abroad to wonder at the heights of mountains, at the huge waves of the sea, at the long courses of the rivers, at the vast compass of the ocean, at the circular motions of the stars; and they pass by themselves without wondering" (in *Reader's Digest* [1/92], p. 9). Every person has in his or her body sufficient proof that God exists. To ignore that kind of evidence renders a person without excuse (Rom. 1:18-23). To say that something as finely balanced and complex as the human body is the result of sheer chance plus time is nothing short of ludicrous!

Consider the miracle of the human body: Every second more than 100,000 chemical reactions take place in your brain. It has 10 billion nerve cells to record what you see and hear. That information comes to your brain through the miracle of the eye, which has 100 million receptor cells (rods and cones) in each eye. Your retina also has four other layers of nerve cells. Altogether the system makes the equivalent of 10 billion calculations a second before an image even gets to the optic nerve. Once it reaches your brain, the cerebral cortex has more than a dozen separate vision centers in which to process it. Your tear ducts supply a bacteria-fighting fluid to protect your eyes from infection. The tears that fight irritants differ from the tears of sadness, which contain 24 percent more proteins. That's not to mention the miracle of the ear and how it

translates sound waves into meaningful speech and sounds; or of touch, taste, and smell.

Part of your brain regulates voluntary matters, such as muscle coordination and thought processes. Other parts of the brain control involuntary processes, such as digestion, glandular secretions, the rate at which your heart beats, etc. How did it accidentally happen that your body could speed up your heart rate to the proper speed to meet increased oxygen demand when you exercise and slow it down when that need is met? One square inch of your skin has about 625 sweat glands, 19 feet of blood vessels, and 19,000 sensory cells. Working in coordination with your brain, it maintains your body at a steady 98.6 degrees under all weather conditions.

Your stomach has 35 million glands which secrete the right amounts of juices to allow your body to digest food and convert it into stored energy for your muscles. To avoid digesting itself, your stomach produces a new lining every three days. Your body is an efficient machine: to ride a bicycle for an hour at ten miles per hour requires only 350 calories, the energy equivalent of only three tablespoons of gasoline.

You have more than 200 bones, each shaped for its function, connected intricately to one another through lubricated joints that cannot be perfectly duplicated by modern science. More than 500 muscles connect to these bones. Some obey willful commands; others perform their duty in response to unconscious commands from the brain. They all work together to keep us alive. The heart muscle itself beats over 103,000 times each day, pumping your blood cells a distance of 168 million miles.

Coupled with that, your lungs automatically breathe in the right amount of life-giving oxygen (about 438 cubic feet each day), which just happens to be mixed in the right proportions (about 20% oxygen, 80% nitrogen) in our atmosphere. Each of the other vital organs and glands in your body works in complex conjunction with the others to sustain life, which science can't explain or create.

I haven't even mentioned the complexity of human cells. Listen to this: A single human chromosome (DNA molecule) contains 20 billion bits of information. How much is that? What would be its equivalent, if it were written down in an ordinary printed book

in modern human language? Twenty billion bits are the equivalent of about three billion letters. If there are approximately six letters in an average word, the information content of a human chromosome corresponds to about 500 million words. If there are about 300 words on an ordinary page of printed type, this corresponds to about two million pages. If a typical book contains 500 such pages, the information content of a single human chromosome corresponds to some 4,000 volumes. "It is clear, then, that the sequence of rungs on our DNA ladders represents an enormous library of information. It is equally clear that so rich a library is required to specify as exquisitely constructed and intricately functioning an object as a human being."

That information, incredibly, comes from the astronomer, Carl Sagan, who thinks it all happened by chance (*The Dragons of Eden, Speculations on the Evolution of Human Intelligence* [Ballentine Books], pp. 23-25)! He points out that the Viking landers that put down on Mars in 1976, each had instructions in their computers amounting to a few million bits, slightly more than a bacterium, but significantly less than an alga. Yet he thinks that life on this planet evolved by chance! Would he say that the Viking spacecraft could evolve, given enough time? Who, I ask, has more faith--the creationist or the evolutionist?

When David says (in v. 18), "When I awake, I am still with You," he may be referring to the fact that each morning the thoughts of God's omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence are still with him, so that he can't escape the overwhelming fact of God in relation to himself. Or, he may be referring poetically to God's presence after death, in the resurrection. In that case, David would be referring to God's hand on his life from conception through eternity.

But in any case, the awesome thought that God skillfully made me and ordained the days of my life ought to make me see that I can't escape from His power and sovereignty. By the way, even if you suffer from birth defects, God declares that He made you. When Moses complained to God that he couldn't speak eloquently enough to lead Israel out of Egypt, God said, "Who has made man's mouth? Or who makes him dumb or deaf, or seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?" (Exod. 4:11).

That means that God has fashioned and has a purpose in this fallen world even for those whose bodies or minds are not perfectly formed. That God creates and ordains the days of each human life gives significance and value to each life and it strongly confronts the abortion of any baby, even if it is supposedly “defective.”

So David is saying that you can't escape from God. He knows everything about you; He is with you wherever you go; He has created you and ordained the days of your life. So what's the bottom line? What do you do with a God like this? In the final stanza, David shows that ...

4. Therefore, I must commit myself to holiness (139:19-24).

The inescapable conclusion of the fact that we can't escape from the living God is an inescapable commitment to holiness. As David thinks about God's searching knowledge, His ubiquitous presence, and His infinite wisdom as seen in his own body, he is led first to cry out to God to destroy the wicked, affirming his own abhorrence of them (vv. 19-22); and then quickly to add a prayer that the God who had searched him (v. 1) would continue the process, so that if any sin still lurked in the dark corners of his own life, David could root it out and walk in God's everlasting way. This shows us two aspects of holiness which we must develop:

A. Holiness means living apart from the wicked (vv. 19-22).

Does the thought of “perfect hatred” strike you as odd? Does it seem like a vice rather than a virtue? We have a syrupy, sentimental notion of love in our day. We wrongly think that Christians should not hate anything. But to fear God is to hate evil (Prov. 8:13). We can't love God properly and be complacent about sin.

I know what you're thinking: “I was just making a little progress in learning to love my enemies and now this guy Cole comes along and tells me I'm supposed to hate them with a perfect hatred! How can I love them and hate them at the same time?” C. H. Spurgeon helpfully explains the balance:

To love all men with benevolence is our duty; but to love any wicked man with complacency would be a crime. To hate a man for his own sake, or for any evil done to us, would be wrong; but to hate a man because he is the foe of all goodness

and the enemy of all righteousness, is nothing more nor less than an obligation. The more we love God the more indignant shall we grow with those who refuse him their affection (*The Treasury of David* [Baker], VII:229).

R. C. Sproul explains along the same lines:

If there is such a thing as perfect hatred it would mirror and reflect the righteousness of God. It would be perfect to the extent that it excluded sinful attitudes of malice, envy, bitterness, and other attitudes we normally associate with human hatred. In this sense a perfect hatred could be deemed compatible with a love for one's enemies. One who hates his enemy with a perfect hatred is still called to act in a loving and righteous manner toward him ("Tabletalk" [11/91], p. 9).

Jude 22-23 reflects the fine line between loving sinners but hating their sin: "And have mercy on some, who are doubting; save others, snatching them out of the fire; and on some have mercy with fear, hating even the garment polluted by the flesh." Holiness means living apart from the wicked and staying undefiled from their sin, but reaching out to them with the message of salvation.

B. Holiness means living openly before God (vv. 23-24).

David no sooner mentions the wicked and his hatred for their irreverence than he quickly realizes his own need for God's cleansing. This is not so much a prayer that God may know him (which He already does, v. 1), but rather that David might know himself through God's purifying, refining fire. There are two elements to a holy life in these verses:

First, I must constantly expose my inner life to God. "Search me, try me" David is inviting God to shine His pure light into the inner recesses of his thought life, where all sin originates. If you want to be holy, not just outwardly, where you can fake it, but inwardly, you must constantly confront your thought life with God's Word.

Second, I must constantly yield my whole life to God. "Lead me" When God's Word exposes where I'm wrong, I must submit to the Lord and walk in His way. Knowledge without obedience leads to deception and pride. I must become a doer of the Word, not just a hearer who deludes myself (James 1:22).

Conclusion

John Calvin wisely wrote, "It is certain that man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God's face, and then descends from contemplating him to scrutinize himself" (*Institutes of the Christian Religion* [Westminster Press], edited by John T. McNeill, 1:1:2). That's what David is saying here: Look upon God: He knows you thoroughly; He is with you everywhere you go; He has wondrously created you and sovereignly ordained the days of your life. Then, scrutinize yourself by inviting the searchlight of God's Word into your innermost thoughts and feelings and by yielding yourself to be obedient to God's ways. Since you can't escape from God, you must commit yourself to holiness.

Discussion Questions

1. Why are we afraid to be known thoroughly? How vulnerable should we be? What principles guide how much we share with others?
2. How can a person develop a sense of God's unshakable presence, so as not to sin?
3. Is theistic evolution a viable option for Christians? What do we lose when we negate God as Creator?
4. Does God love everyone equally (Ps. 5:5-6)? Must we (Ps. 139:21-22)? What does this mean practically?

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