

PSALMS

Chapter 139

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!

Ps 139 A prayer for God to examine the heart and see its true devotion. Like Job, the author firmly claims his loyalty to the Lord. Nowhere (outside Job) does one find expressed such profound awareness of how awesome it is to ask God to examine not only one’s life but also his soul—God, who knows every thought, word and deed, from whom there is no hiding, who has been privy even to one’s formation in the dark concealment of the womb. The thought progresses steadily in four poetic paragraphs of six verses each (vv. 1–6, 7–12, 13–18, 19–24), and each paragraph is concluded with a couplet that elaborates on the unit’s central theme. References to God’s searching and knowing begin and end the prayer. (CSB)

Though the notation “to the choirmaster” suggests a use in public worship, this psalm of David is deeply personal and contemplative.

Format: Vv 1–6, the Lord knows His people; vv 7–12, the Lord is everywhere present; vv 13–16, the Lord created every person; vv 17–18, God’s thoughts are vast; vv 19–22, the Lord’s enemies; vv 23–24, the Lord leads. (TLSB)

The 139th psalm is a psalm of thanks that praises God that he has provided for them so wonderfully and still reigns in all of his works, words, and thoughts. Whether the psalmist stands, walks, sleeps, or wakes – yes, even in his mother’s womb, before he was made – God has been with him as he was being formed and will be with him as long as he lives.

It is as if the psalmist should say: Every human ability or power – how we live, what we do, speak, think, wherever and whenever, from where we come and to where we should go – it is all clearly God’s work and art. What then do the abominable ungodly do those who do not believe this but want to make themselves pious through their vexations work? They want to have done what they do and then want to receive worship, honor, and glory from God on account of it. But they do not create so much as one word by themselves, indeed cannot create one thought by their own power. Moreover, they do not understand what they do, how they are created, how they live, speak, and think. Because all that we are and do are God’s work and powers, how can they consider it to be their own noble work to make themselves godly, praise their free will, and deliver themselves from sin and death? Such people cannot rightly speak about God and his work. Protect us from this, O God, and bless my heart, so that may remain in the true way that stands forever. (Reading the Psalms with Luther)

This psalm is a practical discussion of God’s attributes. (PBC)

139:1–6 God, you know me perfectly, far beyond my knowledge of myself: my every action (v. 2a), my every undertaking (v. 3a) and the manner in which I pursue it (v. 3b), even my thoughts before they are fully crystallized (v. 2b) and my words before they are uttered (v. 4). (CSB)

God knows our weaknesses, not to take advantage of them, but to help us overcome them. God knows our trouble, not to exploit them, but to help us with them. (PBC)

139:1 *O Lord* – The use of the personal, covenant name “Yahweh” is appropriate, for it harmonizes with the emphasis on God’s intimate knowledge and superintendence of the life of the psalmist as well as his protecting presence. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

searched me and known me! God is omniscient; i.e., He knows everything. This includes knowing us—our actions, our thoughts, even our future—with perfect intimacy. (TLSB)

This compares the process and findings of a diligent human search to the process and findings of a diligent human search to the immediate and complete knowledge God has of the psalmist. The verb “search” is used for such human activities as spies searching out the land, mines searching for precious ore, or scribes searching the laws. Divine knowledge, of course, does not require that God engage in such a search, and so the expression is figurative – it is as if God has made such a search and discovered all there was to know. The figure gives the reader a clearer understanding of the thorough, diligent, and determined knowledge that the Lord has of people. The verb should be classified as a present perfect, stressing the lasting result of the “search.” (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

139:2 *when I sit down...rise up* – God knows every move the psalmist’s makes (including sitting down and rising up, but much more than those two movements). (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

Discern my thoughts from afar – The point is that God not only knows every move people make, but knows their motivations as well, what they are striving for in them. All of these things God evaluates, for the verb is “to discern, to perceive” (s.v. Ps. 49:1). He not only knows everything we do but also evaluates all of it. And he does this “from afar,” a word that can mean “afar” in either space or time. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

139:3 *search* – This develops the idea of discerning with a figure: “You winnow my journeying forth and my lying down. The verb “winnow, sift compares God’s evaluating, penetrating

knowledge to the process of winnowing grain – separating what is worthless from what is valuable. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

My lying down – This means one’s entire daily routine. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

Ways – The psalmist is therefore saying that the Lord is completely familiar with all his daily activities, as familiar as one might be for whom they are habitual. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

This knowledge of God is nothing less than knowledge that discerns and discriminates in favor of those who are loyal to the Lord. The discerning and favorable acts of God are gracious. It is grace that justifies, and it is *Ways* – The psalmist is therefore saying that the Lord is completely familiar with all his daily activities, as familiar as one might be for whom they are habitual. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross) by grace that humans are blessed. (The Expositor’s Bible Commentary – Psalms)

139:4 *a word is on my tongue* – The idea is that the psalmist has not yet been able to frame the words that he wants to say, God knows everything that will be said. The point of the illustration is that this much about this detail of life, he certainly knows all the activities and intentions we have. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

139:5 *You hem me in.* To keep me under scrutiny. (CSB)

God surrounds us. We cannot escape Him. (TLSB)

The verb used here (means to confine, besiege.” It has the sense of being surrounded and restricted. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

To be hemmed in by God’s knowledge and to have his hand on us can be either a comfort or a threat. Our response depends on one crucial relationship; are we sinners trying to escape an angry judge or are we dear children in the arms of loving father? It is faith that changes us from fearful sinners to confident children. (PBC)

laid your hand upon me. So that I do not escape you. The figures are different in Job 13:27, but the thought is much the same. (CSB)

The word for “hand” here is not the ordinary word that would express the power of God; rather, it is the “palm” of the hand, like a bug on the table. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

139:6 *too wonderful for me.* Yours is a “wonder” knowledge, beyond my human capacity—the Hebrew term regularly applies to God’s wondrous acts (see 77:11, 14, “miracles”; Ex 15:11). (CSB)

The word translated “wonderful” does not express a pleasing and happy response. The word means something is full of wonder, surpassing, extra-ordinary, or incomprehensible. The kind of knowledge he has been describing is not human; it is supernatural and surpassing, wonderful in the sense of extraordinary and incomprehensible. To be hemmed in by God’s knowledge and to have his hand on us can be either a comfort or a threat. Our response depends on one crucial relationship; are we sinners trying to escape an angry judge or are we dear children in the arms of loving father? It is faith that changes us from fearful sinners to confident children. (PBC)

It is high; I cannot attain it – This meaning is complemented by the parallel military expression: “it is high, I cannot prevail over it.” The verb “it is high” describes something that is unattainably high, like a wall of a fortress. God’s knowledge is like a high fortress before which he stands powerless. God has all the controlling knowledge; and so the psalmist feels trapped and powerless. To be hemmed in by God’s knowledge and to have his hand on us can be either a comfort or a threat. Our response depends on one crucial relationship; are we sinners trying to escape an angry judge or are we dear children in the arms of loving father? It is faith that changes us from fearful sinners to confident children. (PBC)

Our little mind just cannot begin to fathom the depth of the mind of God, to put it mildly. (Leupold)

139:7–12 There is no hiding from you—here no abstract doctrine of divine omnipresence but an awed confession that God cannot be escaped (see Jer 23:23–24). (CSB)

This section begins with the same ambiguity as the first section. It sounds as if David is trying to escape from God’s presence, but as the psalm progresses, it becomes clear that David’s talk of escape is hypothetical and that he rejoices in the presence of God. (PBC)

139:7 *your Spirit* – See 51:11; Isa 63:9–10; Eze 39:29 (“face ... Spirit”). (CSB)

Chemnitz: “Lest anyone argue that the Holy Spirit is called God and Lord in only a metaphorical sense, we should examine also the passages which attribute to the Holy Spirit those qualities which belong only to the true God, such as the work of creation and preservation of all things” (*LTh* 1:139). (TLSB)

presence? God is omnipresent. Wherever we go, God is there. (TLSB)

These two rhetorical questions are designed to express the negative idea that there is no place to go where he would not be in the presence of God. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

139:8 *the heavens ... the depths*. The two vertical extremes. (CSB)

According to verse 3; now the point is that God is there in every place the psalmists could go or even conceive of going. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

Sheol. God’s presence spans the greatest polarities, from the highest skies to the depths of the earth, from heaven to hell. (TLSB)

Although the people in hell do not experience God’s gracious presence, even those in hell will recognize that it is the Lord, not Satan, who is the master of hell. (PBC)

139:9 *wings of the dawn ... far side of the sea*. The two horizontal extremes: east and west (the sea is the Mediterranean). Using a literary figure in which the totality is denoted by referring to its two extremes (merism), vv. 8–9 specify all spatial reality, the whole creation. (CSB)

Pictures the sun’s rays coming up over the horizon. Similar poetic language describes other poles of God’s presence, from the horizon to the depths of the sea, from light to darkness (v. 11). (TLSB)

The psalmist is here raising the hypothetical idea that he might mount up in flight at dawn and streak across the sky with the speed of light from east to west. Even if he could do that, he could not escape the presence of God. Still using the image of a bird in flight, the psalmist envisions the destination in the uttermost west, the far side of the Mediterranean Sea, the place of the sunset. But the sea also was for the biblical writers a place of chaos and death, very much like *she'ol* or the abyss. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

139:10 *guide me ... hold me fast.* Though this language occurs in 73:23–24 to indicate God’s solicitous care, it here denotes God’s inescapable supervision, not unlike the thought of v. 5. (CSB)

God is not only present but also providentially cares for and directs us. (TLSB)

The tone of the psalm now changes completely, perhaps because his thinking about the places he might go without God – *she'ol*, or the dark, uttermost parts of the sea. These are places he would not want to be without God. Two things show the change. First, he now uses the other word for “hand” which refers to the hand and forearm and signifies the power of God. Second, the verbs are not now verbs of besieging but of leading and guiding. The verb “lead, guide” is used in Psalm 23 (s.v. 23:3_); it is definitely favorable and comforting. The other verb is “hold fast, seize; in any place of danger, in any remote or dark land, it would be a comfort to know that God was holding him firmly in his power. God is not only present with him everywhere, but holding him and guiding him with loving intentions. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

139:11–12 Just as the whole creation offers no hiding place (vv. 8–9), neither does even the darkness. (CSB)

139:11 *light about me be night.* God sees through darkness as if it cares for and directs us. (TLSB)

The idea of the oppression expressed in the bruising would darken him with wounds. Clearly, there are very dangerous places where one might be. But he affirms that even if that were the case, it would be no problem for the Lord. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

139:12 *for darkness is as light with you* – Even the darkness will not be too dark for you; the night shall shine like the day, for darkness is as the light to you. Nothing is the darkness can harm him, for neither darkness nor distance can separate him from God’s powerful presence and penetrating knowledge. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

139:13–16 You yourself put me together in the womb and ordained the span of my life before I was born. (CSB)

This section meditates on one aspect of God’s mighty power – his power of creation. (PBC)

139:13 *created.* The Hebrew for this verb is the same as in Ge 14:19, 22; Pr 8:22 (“brought ... forth”), not as in Ge 1:1, 21, 27. (CSB)

inmost being. Lit. “kidneys”—in Hebrew idiom, the innermost center of emotions and of moral sensitivity—that which God tests and examines when he “searches” a person. (CSB)

Our very bodies with their internal organs and biological complexity, as we developed in the womb, are the work of God. (TLSB)

Although these verses do not address the issue of abortion directly, they are certainly relevant to it. (PBC)

Knitted me together – Connotes plaiting and interweaving, as with muscles, nerves, and veins. The human body is described as an artistically designed network. (TLSB)

The verb “to weave together, knit” is figurative picturing the formation of the body as the weaving of a beautiful tapestry. The body truly is a work of art. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

139:14 *fearfully ... wonderfully ... wonderful.* You know me as the One who formed me (see vv. 15–16), but I cannot begin to comprehend this creature you have fashioned. I can only look upon him with awe and wonder—and praise you (see Ecc 11:5). (CSB)

“God created the body and soul of Adam and Eve before the fall. But He also created our bodies and souls after the fall. Even though they are corrupt, God still acknowledges them as His work” (FC Ep I 4). (TLSB)

The reason for the praise is because he realizes that he is “uniquely made” in a “fearful manner” (Ps. 2:11). The participle “fearful” is used adverbially here. He is saying, “I am extraordinary in a way that produces fear.” (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

My soul knows it very well – Though God’s grace toward him is like “knowledge...too wonderful for” him to comprehend, he lives with a personal awareness of God’s gracious purpose. The psalmist reveals unique awareness of God’s grace toward him and responds with a hymn of thanksgiving. (The Expositor’s Bible Commentary – Psalms)

139:15 *my frame* – The skeleton and, by extension, the state of being. (TLSB)

secret place – Reference is to the womb: called “the secret place” because it normally conceals (see 2Sa 12:12), and it shares with “the depths of the earth” associations with darkness, dampness and separation from the visible realm of life. Moreover, both phrases refer to the place of the dead (63:9; Job 14:13; Isa 44:23; 45:19), with which on one level the womb appears to have been associated: Man comes from the dust and returns to the dust (90:3; Ge 3:19; Ecc 3:20; 12:7), and the womb is the “depth”-like place where he is formed (see Isa 44:2, 24; 49:5; Jer 1:5). (CSB)

This metaphor for the womb recalls that God shaped us as He shaped Adam, and that we, too, are dust and to dust we will return (Gn 3:19). (TLSB)

Intricately woven – This verb is another figure, comparing the idea of “weave together, embroider (in variegated colors)” with the development of the body in the womb under God’s superintendence. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

depths of the earth – In the psalmist’s day inside of the womb would have been as remote to the human eye and knowledge as any region in the netherworld. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

139:16 *unformed body* – An embryo. (TLSB)

your book. The heavenly royal register of God's decisions. (CSB)

Some have seen a parallel with the way the genetic "language" encoded in DNA directs the development of the child in the womb. More broadly, God has written out the course of our days, from our conception to our death. (TLSB)

written – "All things, whether they are past or future, are clear and present before God" (FC SD XI 4). (TLSB)

The psalmist is saying that the Lord planned all the activities of his life before he was even born. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

139:17 *your thoughts.* As expressed in his works—and in contrast with "my thoughts" (v. 2). (CSB)

The mind of God is unfathomable, but the psalmist cherishes being able to contemplate God's wisdom in creation and revelation. (TLSB)

What is precious are God's intentions is the same word that was used in verse 2, which was translated "intentions, motivations." The intentions God has for us would be a figure of speech, because the text mentions God's intentions. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

Sum of them – Hbr *ro'sh*, "head," "top," "chief." (TLSB)

This exclaims that the "sums" (plural, as if many sums) of them are vast. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

139:18 *When I awake.* The sleep of exhaustion overcomes every attempt to count God's thoughts/works (see 63:6; 119:148), and waking only floods my soul once more with the sense of the presence of this God. (CSB)

Imagery is of someone counting God's thoughts, which are more numerous than the grains of sand, until falling asleep. Upon awakening, the person is still contemplating God's thoughts and enjoying His presence. The Hbr for "to awake" and "come to an end" are similar, so wordplay may be intended. (TLSB)

139:19–22 My zeal for you sets me against all your adversaries. (CSB)

139:19 *If only.* Jealous impatience with God's patience toward the wicked—whose end will come (Isa 11:4). But the psalmist leaves it to God. (CSB)

wicked. Though God is wise, loving, and good, many people hate Him, blaspheme His name, and rebel against Him. (TLSB)

The description of these people begins with the word "wicked" (s.v. Ps. 1:1), the word for the ungodly, someone who is a guilty person, not a member of the covenant community, not a believer, and one who is capable of all manner of evil against God and his people. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

The "wicked" (cf. 1:1, 6) are destructive, scheming, and rebellious to the rule of God in this world. (The Expositor's Bible Commentary – Psalms)

men of blood. People who cause others to shed blood, destroying the lives of those God has so lovingly made! (TLSB)

The genitive “blood” is attributive, meaning that they are bloody men, or bloodthirsty men – killers. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

This denotes a lack of respect for life and regard for justice and righteousness (cf. 5:6; Prov. 29:10). (The Expositor’s Bible Commentary – Psalms)

Depart from me – To “depart” is more of a warning than anything else: God is with him, and therefore opposed to them. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

139:20 *misuse your name.* Perhaps by calling down curses on those trying to be the faithful servants of God. (CSB)

To take the name of the Lord in vain would be to give false testimony or to swear falsely. Their religious expressions are hollow and vain – they use them to cover their malicious attacks on the psalmist. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

139:21–22 A declaration of loyalty that echoes the pledge required by ancient Near Eastern kings of their vassals (e.g., “With my friend you shall be friend, and with my enemy you shall be enemy,” from a treaty between Mursilis II, a Hittite king, and Tette of Nuhasi, 14th century B.C.). (CSB)

139:21 May refer to the oaths used in covenants, forming allegiance between parties. To love righteousness is to hate unrighteousness. To love God is to hate whatever opposes Him. (TLSB)

Hate – At the heart of the word translated “hate” is the idea “to reject” (as opposed to the word for “love” which has an emphasis on choosing). (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

Romans 9:13 “*As it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.”*”

Who hate you – The form that the psalmist uses for their hatred of the Lord is a more intensive form (a piel participle), underscoring their intense hatred of God. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

Loathe those who rise up against you – “Those who utterly despise (totally reject) you, O Lord, do not I hate (reject)? The psalmist knew what the apostles affirmed later, namely, that to be loyal to the Lord one cannot have fellowship or even close friendship with the avowed enemies of the Lord (2 Cor. 6). (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

139:22 *complete hatred.* God hates sin; the psalmist shares that complete abhorrence. (TLSB)

He uses the adverbial accusative “complete” from s.v. Ps. 90:7, followed by the genitive after to word of entirety and totality, to strengthen the verbal idea – “[with] completeness of hatred I hate them.” His is a total rejection of God’s enemies. The point is clarified by the parallel expression stating that they have become his enemies. Again, the point is important: they were first God’s enemies, and since he is loyal to God, they have become his enemies. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

139:23–24 Examine me, see the integrity of my devotion and keep me true. (CSB)

David closes not with pride, but humility. He recognizes that without forgiveness he too would fall under the wrath of a holy God. (PBC)

139:23 *search me* – Psalmist applies God’s stringent standards to himself. Returning to the theme of v 1, he asks God to extend His omniscience to his inner life, to search out the traces of sin in his life, so that God’s presence might lead him to everlasting life. (TLSB)

Try me – The word means “to examine” in order to discover any spiritual weaknesses in him. Just as one would refine a metal to remove impurities, so God should test his life for impurities. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

anxious thoughts. It is no light matter to be examined by God. (CSB)

The impurities are called “my disquieting thoughts,” from the root; the idea is that of anxious, excited thoughts, disquietings, and therefore weaknesses in his faith that might lead to sin (s.v. Ps. 94:19). David wants his loyalty to match his understanding of the God he has been describing. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

John 21:18 *Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go.*”

139:24 *offensive way* – That which causes the pain and misery that is punishment for sin. (TLSB)

The object of this examination is to determine if there is any “way of pain” in him. The way refers to any activities or mannerisms in his life; and the qualifying word “pain” modifies this word to mean any activity that causes pain (a metonymy of effect, “pain” being put for the activity that causes the pain). (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

The psalmist desires nothing less than conformity to God’s will; therefore he prays for God’s examination of his spiritual condition. (The Expositor’s Bible Commentary – Psalms)

the way everlasting. (Describes the joy of total security. David speaks here, as in the rest of his psalms, first of all of himself and of the life he now enjoys by the gracious provision and care of God. The Lord, in whom the psalmist takes refuge, wills life for him (hence he made known to him the path of life, v. 11) and will not abandon him to the grave, even though “flesh and ... heart ... fail.” But implicit in these words of assurance (if not actually explicit) is the confidence that, with the Lord as his refuge, even the grave cannot rob him of life. (CSB)

This expression refers to the right way of living that will endure. It is comparable to seeking first the kingdom of and its righteousness (Matthew 6:33). It is the course of life that results in rest and blessing, but which if abandoned results in destruction (cf. Ps. 1:6; Jer. 6:16; 18:18). (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

Ps 139 A meditation on God’s attributes: His omniscience, His omnipresence, His omnipotence, and His holiness. The psalmist’s wonder segues into anger at those who hate God and destroy His gift of life. That God knows our every thought, word, and deed can be terrifying to a sinner. This psalm also gives a clear answer to today’s controversy about the value of human life and when life begins, clearly condemning abortion and other assaults on developing children. And yet, this

psalm, above all, proclaims God's love, which He expresses in His personal care and involvement in all of His creation. God's knowledge, power, and presence were manifest most fully when He Himself assumed our substance, with a human body knit together in the womb of the Virgin Mary, and grew up to bear in that body God's hatred of sin at the cross. • O Lord, thank You for knowing us so completely! Confound the abortionists, the "men of blood" (v 19) and others who would abuse and harm the bodies You have made. Lead us to agree with Your judgment against sin, especially with the sin in our own lives. Cleanse us with Christ's blood, born of the Virgin Mary, who is present for our salvation in His Word and Sacraments. Amen. (TLSB)