

Call and Response
Psalm 139
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It's great to see you all again and to be preaching at McBIC this morning after not preaching here the past two Sundays.

I've thoroughly enjoyed preparing for and preaching these sermons on the Psalms. If you've been around McBIC for a while, you may recall that we last preached on the Psalms several years ago in the fall of 2018. At that time, we studied 8 psalms over 7 weeks. This time around I selected 6 different psalms for us to explore. Do you realize we could preach on the Psalms every week for nearly 3 years if we chose to look at all 150 of them one at a time?

The Psalms are so rich. They powerfully communicate God's nature and character, and they serve as a mirror to the human heart. I think our sermon series title, "Call and Response," captures the essence of the Psalms so well, because the Psalms really are our prayer book. The Psalms put human emotions into words, and they demonstrate what it looks like for us to call out to God with honesty, humility, transparency and vulnerability.

A.W. Tozer, a well-known 20th Century pastor and writer, said the most important thing about us is what comes to our minds when we think about God. Others have piggy-backed on Tozer's statement to make the case that the 2nd most important thing about us is how we perceive our identity in God through Jesus. This morning we're studying Psalm 139. And part of the reason this psalm is so powerful is because it speaks to both of these issues—clearly portraying who God is and giving us deeper understanding of our identity in Him. I encourage you to listen and absorb these powerful words as I read them...

Psalm 139

You have searched me, LORD, and you know me.

²You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar.

³You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways.

⁴Before a word is on my tongue you, LORD, know it completely.

⁵You hem me in behind and before, and you lay your hand upon me.

⁶Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain.

⁷Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?

⁸If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

⁹If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.

¹¹If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me," ¹²even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.

¹³For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb.

¹⁴I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.

¹⁵My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth.

¹⁶Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.

¹⁷How precious to me are your thoughts, God! How vast is the sum of them!

¹⁸Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand—when I awake, I am still with you.

¹⁹If only you, God, would slay the wicked! Away from me, you who are bloodthirsty!

²⁰They speak of you with evil intent; your adversaries misuse your name.

²¹Do I not hate those who hate you, LORD, and abhor those who are in rebellion against you?

²²I have nothing but hatred for them; I count them my enemies.

²³Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts.

²⁴See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

I never noticed it before preparing for this sermon, but Psalm 139 is written in 4 sections of 6 verses each. In the first 3 sections David praises God for his omniscience and his omnipotence—theological words that speak to God being all-knowing and all-powerful. In the last section David shares his lament with God. Whatever was occurring in David's life that

caused him to write his lament seems to be the impetus for this psalm. In verses 1-18 David declares to God what he knows to be true about Him, prior to sharing his lament in verses 19-22 and then his request in verses 23 & 24 for God to search his heart and alert David to any offensive way that is in him.

I'd like us to look more closely at the first 3 sections of Psalm 139, asking the questions, "What does this psalm teach us about God?" and "What do we learn about ourselves?" I'll start by reading verses 1-6 again...

Psalm 139:1-6

You have searched me, LORD, and you know me.

²You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar.

³You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways.

⁴Before a word is on my tongue you, LORD, know it completely.

⁵You hem me in behind and before, and you lay your hand upon me.

⁶Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain.

The simple statement, *God knows me and everything about me*, sums up these verses well. One of the greatest longings of the human heart is to be known, and while spouses, close friends, parents and children may know us well, we're never fully known by any person. In fact, the Bible tells us we can't even fully know our own heart. God knowing us and everything about us provides us with great security and stability.

Last week during the response time to Pastor Susan's sermon on Psalm 109 I asked one of the prayer team members to pray for me. During the sermon I sensed God putting his finger on how sensitive I am to respond in frustration to others when I perceive they slight me in some way—particularly with family members. After I shared my request—the person I went to for prayer prayed that my identity would be firmly rooted in Christ and that instead of responding out of my own insecurities, I'd be able to rest confidently and securely in Christ. Embracing the truth that God knows us and everything about us and that He loves us unconditionally, allows us to respond with grace, rather than defensiveness. During that prayer I saw the connection between the psalm Susan preached on last week and Psalm 139. Having

our identity firmly rooted in God’s unconditional love and living out of that identity provides us with assurance and security.

Let’s look now at verses 7-12...

Psalm 139:7-12

⁷ Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?

⁸ If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

⁹ If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.

¹¹ If I say, “Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,” ¹² even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.

These verses remind me that *God is with me wherever I go. I can’t escape his presence.* I’ve been familiar with words of this psalm for as far back as I can remember, but I especially recall this psalm ministering to me in 2005 as I was preparing to go on a mission trip to Thailand with a team from McBIC. These verses ministered to my heart as I prepared to go to the other side of the earth, but they are equally true for us every day. Our Heavenly Father is always with us and we can’t escape his presence. Think about the implications of that verse for you in your daily life.

David continues in verses 13-18...

Psalm 139:13-18

¹³ For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb.

¹⁴ I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.

¹⁵ My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth.

¹⁶ Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.

¹⁷ How precious to me are your thoughts, God! How vast is the sum of them!

¹⁸ Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand—when I awake, I am still with you.

I'd sum up these verses with the statement, *God created me and knew before I was born. My life and the length of my days are in his hands.* I've found these verses particularly helpful in two specific situations. First, these verses offer powerful truth for people struggling with their own self-worth. The verses remind us that none of us are here by accident and God doesn't make mistakes. I've watched God minister to people powerfully as they've been able to embrace the fact that God not only knows them; He created them and knew them before they were born. And the second situation in which I often read these words is when people are struggling with serious illness or facing the inevitability of death. It's comforting to grasp that the God who designed us and created us, also ordains the days of our lives. We don't have to fear death when we rest securely in and with Jesus.

I mentioned near the beginning of the sermon that David's lament in verses 19-22 seem to be the context for this psalm. In these verses David cried out...

Psalm 139:19-22

¹⁹ If only you, God, would slay the wicked! Away from me, you who are bloodthirsty!

²⁰ They speak of you with evil intent; your adversaries misuse your name.

²¹ Do I not hate those who hate you, LORD, and abhor those who are in rebellion against you?

²² I have nothing but hatred for them; I count them my enemies.

And then David concludes the psalm with words of submission to God—inviting God to search him and know his heart. It's encouraging for me to see how quickly David transitions from railing against his enemies and pleading with God to destroy them to humbly surrendering himself to God. As you listen to these words, I invite you to make them your prayer today...

Psalm 139:23 & 24

²³ Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts.

²⁴ See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

I don't know of a more intimate psalm than Psalm 139. As I prepared to preach on this psalm, I recalled how Psalm 139 has ministered to me and how I've seen it minister to others. I thought it might help us connect with this psalm on a personal level if we could hear from some people what this psalm has meant to them. I invited my Facebook friends to share how God used this psalm to minister to them and the responses I received were amazing. My thanks to

all who responded. Unfortunately, I don't have time to share all your responses, but I appreciate you taking the time to share. I hope these words are encouraging to each you...

A pastor friend of mine wrote, "Verses 7-12 have spoken life and strength to me during those dark nights of the soul when defeat seemed to be all around beckoning me to quit: 'Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.'"

A mom who is also a pastor wrote, "Verses 14 and 15 ministered to me at 2 defining moments in my life. When my daughter was 3 the preschool teachers at our church had the children stand in front of these verses. They took a picture of each child and sent it home. I wrote. 'No matter how my daughter acted or what I thought she should be or do, God had fearfully and wonderfully made her. It defined and altered my parenting from that day forward.' Years later, these verses were part of the section I was assigned to read at community event. I could hardly read, because I was in a dark spot, questioning my worth and value, but the Holy Spirit used these verses to whisper to me that I was enough."

A mother, now in her 30s, wrote, "When I was pregnant and unmarried, verses 13-18 helped me remember 'My child was not a mistake and God has a purpose for my son and for me. I found peace in knowing God knows me intimately, but still thinks good things about me. Even in my sin, God never abandoned His purpose for my life. I could not hide in the dark. Even there I was pursued."

Another pastor friend, now retired, wrote, "I grew up thinking God was after me. He had a big hammer just waiting for me to step out of line, then bang! After I got sick I was looking for compassion from God. I turned to this Psalm which I had feared while growing up. One day the Holy Spirit spoke to me. At the end of each period write, "because You love me Lord". It completely changed my way of thinking. I literally read this thousands of times. It is my special Psalm."

A woman wrote, "I love the beauty of the language..."rise on the wings of the dawn," "make my bed in the depths," and the sense of God always being near. I had nightmares as a child and still have oppressive dreams. A college friend of mine told me that her parents told her to invite Jesus into her bad dreams. I haven't been that successful in chasing away the darkness, but I like having the awareness that darkness is as light to God."

Another woman wrote, "One of my favorite psalms for sure! "Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there." These verses have gotten me through some dark times ...but in particular, directly after a bad accident when I was 21. I had been kicked in the face by a horse, had many facial injuries and had facial reconstructive surgery. I was very self conscious of how my face looked and initially was really struggling with feeling alone and depressed. But during the weeks of recovery laying in bed, I have truly never felt closer to the Lord. I know that He was there with me, in the depths, and pulled me through. I also use this verse often to speak confidence into my daughters...God knit them together exactly as he wanted them to be! When they feel like there's something missing from who they are, I remind them that God doesn't make mistakes and that His hand created them beautifully."

My sister, Leanne, who many of you know tragically lost her husband nearly 3 years ago, wrote, “These verses carried me through the dark days and months after losing my husband. Especially verse 5: ‘You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.’”

My Aunt Joanne, who lost a daughter to cancer at the age of 9, wrote, “When Joy, died at the age of 8, my brother-in-law used verses 13-16, inserting Joy’s name in all the places where “my” was used. For instance, ‘You created Joy’s inmost being, you knit Joy together in her Mother’s womb. All the days ordained for Joy were written in your book before one of them came to be.’ I cry as I write this even now because this was special to me. I feel the emotion to this day.”

A mother of 4 children wrote, “I have a vivid memory as a little girl, sitting around the dinner table as my Dad led us in family devotions. He read Psalm 139:13-16 that says God made me, he formed me and I am fearfully and wonderfully Made...He saw my unformed body even before I was born. I was purposeful and valued. I recall the Holy Spirit assuring me that though I felt negatively toward myself, God adored me and saw me before I was even born. That was transformative in my life.”

The people who wrote those responses are just like you and me, and God loves you and can minister to each of us through his Word just as He did for them. My question for each of us as we move to our time of response is, “Where in your life do you need a reminder of **God’s complete knowledge** of you, **his constant presence** with you and **his awareness** of you from before you were born through the last breath you take?”