

Psalm 139: Dialogue and Surrender

“No escape, no regrets, no compromise.” That’s a description of **Psalm 139**. Filled with good theology about God’s *omniscience* (**139:1-6**), *omnipresence* (**139:7-12**), *creatorship* (**139:13-18**), and *holiness* (**139:19-24**), these four stanzas of **Psalm 139** are complex and intimate, and theological abstractions are “far from its heart.” In fact, you can label these stanzas, “*God’s complete knowledge of me* (1-6),” “*God with me in every place* (7-12),” “*God’s sovereign ownership of every part of me* (13-18),” and “*God’s will that I be like him* (19-24).” (Motyer, *New Bible Commentary*, 578)

The psalm is a unity. *For*, v 13, makes 13-18 an explanation of 1-6, 7-12, and identical wording in vs 1, 23 binds the whole together. This means that the tension between the psalmist and the wicked in 19-24 must be the setting from which the psalm sprang. (Motyer, *New Bible Commentary*, 578)

1. Compare **139:1** and **139:23**. *Searched and search* are Hebrew *hagar*, which always connotes a diligent, difficult probing, an investigation and examination. (See Jeremiah 12:3 and 17:10.)

Know and *known* are the common Hebrew verb *yada*, meaning to know, discern or recognize.

How does he use pairs of opposites (*merisms*) to describe *God’s omniscience*?

How would you describe what the psalmist believes about the God he calls by name, LORD? (**139:1-4**)

According to **139:5-6**, is the psalmist’s awareness of God’s extensive knowledge of him *too wonderful* or marvelous for him (one meaning of *pele’*), or too difficult and overwhelming for him (another meaning)? (Longman, *Psalms*, 453)

Why do people sometimes want to flee from God? Why do you think people imagine that God doesn’t know what they do? Have you ever felt this way?

2. What do the rhetorical questions that open the second stanza (**139:7-12**) add to your understanding of the psalmist’s frame of mind? Respond to this quotation:

The psalmist’s attitude is reminiscent of that of Jonah who wanted to get away from God, but could not because God is present everywhere, including the raging sea. (Longman, *Psalms*, 453)

In the same way he used *merisms* to describe *God’s omniscience* in the first stanza, he uses *merisms* (pairs of opposites) again to describe *God’s omnipresence*. (*Sheol* in the OT is usually the grave, the place of the dead.)

How does reading **139:10-12** in context help you identify with the psalmist's struggle, his possible ambivalence about God's knowledge and presence? Reflect on times you may have been *both* annoyed by God's presence and in awe of it.

In **verses 5 and 10**, how does God's hand touch the psalmist? Have you ever felt God's hand on you? What was it like?

3. Despite his possible ambivalent thoughts and feelings about the extent of God's knowledge and the scope of God's presence, what does this third stanza, **139:13-18**, reveal about the psalmist's thoughts about God's knowledge of him as he continues his meditation/reflection. Where does his meditation take him next?

For in **verse 13**, introducing this stanza, indicates that these particular thoughts point him to *the reason* for God's knowledge and continual searching of him. Why is God "into his business" all the time, invading his privacy and intruding into his space? What is the reason? What finally overwhelms the psalmist according to **vv. 17-18**?

Respond to this quotation from *Psalms for Christian Worship* (p. 571) about mortals intuitively resisting invasion into their privacy:

Impenetrable defenses are developed to protect our knowledge from unwanted intruders. People retreat from relationships, mask their true reality, and talk in anonymity or in disguise. We vigorously guard ourselves against divulging too much. We entrust ourselves to no one but ourselves. Each home is an enclave, each self, an island. (William P. Brown, "Psalm 139," 281, 283)

4. In **139:19-22**, what do you learn about the psalmist's current struggle with enemies that is the setting of **Psalm 139**?

Respond to this quotation from *Psalms for Christian Worship*, p. 570:

The believers' war with the wicked is first and foremost a spiritual battle to establish an honest, warm, intact personal relationship with God...they must first succeed in assuring themselves that no barriers separate them from fellowship with the *I Am*...

The psalmist intertwines his confessions of faith in God and God's attributes in **Psalm 139** with his pledge of allegiance to God (vv.21-22) and concludes with a powerful prayer of surrender in **139:23-24**, recognizing the subtlety of sin.

Why is this *prayer of surrender* so difficult to pray? When was the first time you prayed this kind of prayer to God? What was the result? Can a person be a genuine disciple without praying this kind of prayer?