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## Psalm 139: To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David.

Walter E. Keller

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**Psalm 139**  
**To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David.**  
(Translation mostly from the RSV)

**Introduction**

**<sup>1</sup> O LORD, thou hast searched me and known me!**

These opening words of the Introduction recur in the Conclusion to form a frame for the entire Psalm. Just as the Psalmist knows that the LORD has in the past searched him and known him (verse 1), so also at the end (verse 23) he invites the LORD to continue to do so. The effect of these words is to confess that the LORD knows everything there is to know about me, and to do so not with guilt and shame, but happily and confidently. The strophes that follow are a poetic elaboration of that cheerful acknowledgement.

**Strophe I**  
(God's Omniscience)

**Vv. 2-6:**

**<sup>2</sup> Thou knowest when I sit down and when I rise up;  
thou discernest my thoughts (designs) from afar.**

Even though the LORD may be far away in heaven, He nevertheless can discern our thoughts and designs. The Hebrew word for "thoughts" is used only here, and in verse 17, where it is used of God's thoughts. God has thoughts and we have thoughts. And our human thoughts should be instructed by God's thoughts. To take but one example, when we today in our more scientific way seek to trace the origins of the universe or the origins of human life, we ought not to imagine that we are doing anything other than trying to think God's thoughts after him. Or if we ponder the issues of the end of human life, there too we need to measure our thoughts by God's thoughts. Only so will we be led to the full wonder and praise which is the theme of this Psalm.

- <sup>3</sup> Thou searchest out (measure and record) my path and my lying down,  
and art acquainted with all my ways.**  
**<sup>4</sup> Even before a word is on my tongue,  
lo, O LORD, thou knowest it altogether.**  
**<sup>5</sup> Thou dost beset (protectively surround or besiege) me behind and before,  
and layest thy hand upon me (in order to care for me).**  
**<sup>6</sup> (REB) Knowledge so wonderful is beyond my grasp;  
it is so lofty I cannot reach it.**

That the LORD has such intimate and complete knowledge of me, extending even to knowing my thoughts and words before I speak them, is simply beyond me. There is a limit as to how far my thoughts can think God's thoughts after him. My finite mind can go only so far in trying to comprehend the infinite mind of the God. After that I can only praise His wonder-full greatness.

## **Strophe II** (God's Omnipresence)

In this strophe the Psalmist is concerned to say that there is no place in the entire universe where he could escape or hide from the presence of the LORD. We should note that the presence of God in this Psalm is always a good and gracious presence. The Psalmist does not think of God's presence as that of an avenging nemesis. The Psalm does not at all imply that the Psalmist wants to escape or hide from the LORD; it is rather a praise of that Creator God who is always and everywhere present with His mercy for His People. It is simply inconceivable that we could find a corner of the universe in which God is not graciously present for us.

### **Vv. 7-12:**

**7 Whither shall I go from thy Spirit?**

**Or whither shall I flee from thy presence** (literally "face")?

**8 If I ascend to heaven** (God's own appropriate residence), **thou art there!**

**If I make my bed in Sheol** (the dismal realm of the dead), **thou art there!**

**9 If I take the wings of the morning** (go to the farthest imaginable East)

**or** (not "and," as in the RSV)  **dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea** (go to the farthest imaginable West),

**10 even there thy hand shall lead me** (as a gracious gift),

**and thy right hand shall hold me** (to sustain and care for me).

**11 If I say, "Let only darkness cover me,**

**and the light about me be night,"**

**12 even the darkness is not dark to thee,**

**the night is bright as the day;**

**12b (NRSV) for darkness is as light to you.**

**12b (KJV) the darkness and the light are both alike to thee.**

Both verse 7 and verse 8 receive a further dimension in the light of the fuller revelation of the New Testament. In the Old Testament both halves of verse 7 are synonyms; the spirit of God and God's presence are poetic parallels. They bear witness to the unity of God. The unity of God is also a firm teaching of the New Testament, but in the New Testament, the spirit of God is now revealed as the Spirit of God, the Third Person of the Trinity. And the Face of God is revealed as the glory of God in the Face of Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 4:6), the Second Person of the Trinity. So when we Christians pray this Psalm, we may with complete propriety pray this Psalm while we address it to our Three-Personed God. This is all the more the case, because the Psalm is addressed to the LORD, that is, to Yahweh. Yahweh, you will recall, is the name under which the rescuing and redeeming God of the Old Testament has revealed himself. Because God has so revealed himself, the Psalmist can confidently ask God to search and know him. And this gracious, forgiving God is further revealed in the New Testament as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who is operative among us by His Spirit.

So also in verse 8b there are further dimensions revealed in the New Testament. The Second Person of God, our LORD Jesus Christ, died our common death under the wrath of God. He was entombed and lay among the dead for three days. Hence, not even in death can we escape the

presence of God, who is graciously with us as Immanuel, God-with-us, no matter where we go. And on Easter we celebrate the victory of the resurrection light over the darkness of the grave.

Verse 12b in the old King James' Version of the Bible is the inspiration for The Lutheran Hymnal #47, stanza 3. line 4:

Grant us Thy peace, Lord, through the coming night;  
Turn Thou for us its darkness into light.  
From harm and danger keep Thy children free;  
For *dark and light are both alike to Thee*.

This hymn stanza appears in the following revised translation, both in LBW #262 and in LW #221:

Grant us your peace, Lord, through the coming night:  
For us transform its darkness into light.  
Keep us from harm and danger till the dawn;  
*Your evening presence promise to your own.*

The modern revision conveys an edifying thought, consistent with the underlying thought of Psalm 139. I am frank to admit, however, that I miss a familiar phrase.

### **Strophe III** (God's Omnipotence)

#### **Vv. 13-16:**

**<sup>13</sup> For thou didst form my inward parts** (literally, "kidneys"),

Perhaps the Psalmist was speaking biologically when he referred to the inner anatomical organs. But in his system of language the kidneys were also regarded as the center of our feelings, emotions, and desires; hence he may have been, in his way, referring to our inner life: our psychological and spiritual dimensions or our capacity to reflect upon ourselves. These too, as well as our physical make-up, are a part of the wonder-full creation of God.

**thou didst knit me together in my mother's womb.**

To our day there is a profound mystery attached to the period of gestation in the womb. And that too is the wonder-full work of God. It is therefore all the more a shame to abort this embryonic life, for that not only destroys a life, but it assaults a native sense of mystery before the awesome miracle of new life. It is as he considers that awesome mystery that the Psalmist is moved to praise in the grammatically difficult verses that follow.

**<sup>14</sup> (NRSV) I praise you, for I am fearfully** (in a manner evoking awe) **and wonderfully made.**

**Wonderful are your works;**  
**that I know very well** (through and through);

God has made me, and when I contemplate my life and my body and my mind and my soul and all that makes me "me," I am overcome with awe at how wonderfully I am made. But I also must acknowledge that this production called "me" is the work of God. That I know right well.

Verse 14 is the inspiration for stanza 3 of TLH #39: "Praise to the Lord, who hath fearfully, wondrously made thee!" For some reason unknown to me this verse does not appear in LBW #543 nor in LW #444. It does appear in *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal*, the new Wisconsin Synod hymnal, #234.

**15 my frame** (skeleton) **was not hidden from thee,**  
**when I was being made in secret,**  
**intricately wrought** (NRSV- woven) **in the depths of the earth** (the womb).  
**16 Thy eyes beheld my unformed substance** ("embryo");

God's eye was supervising the entire process of the mysterious formation of life in the womb; nothing escaped the guidance of his goodness.

**in thy book were written, every one of them,**  
**the days that were formed for me,**  
**when as yet there was none of them.**

The text of this most difficult verse here seems to imply that, as God looks at the embryo, He also allots the developing embryo a certain number of days to live after birth, and that that number is written down in God's book. It seems to mean, stated very bluntly, that God decided before I was born how long I was to live. If so, it seems to me that this verse is best understood as an expression of the LORD's care for us. It is everlasting, extending from the very beginning and continuing throughout our life. It would be inappropriate in our praying this verse to think of it in some deterministic, fatalistic sense.

#### **(Strophe IV)**

##### **Vv. 17-18:**

**17 How precious** (NRSV – weighty) **to me are thy thoughts** (designs), **O God!**  
**How vast is the sum of them!**  
**18 If I would count them, they are more than the** (grains of) **sand.**  
**When I awake, I am still with thee.**  
(NRSV) **I come to the end – I am still with you.**

Verses 17-18 can be read either as the concluding exclamation of praise of Strophe III, or, as the NAB has it, as an opening basis for the surprising petition in verse 19. In large part this difficulty is caused by verse 18b, which in this context seems so abrupt and is itself therefore difficult to interpret. The word translated here "awake" can also mean "cut" or "come to an end," (see the foot-note in the RSV). Perhaps it means something like, "If I start counting them, I would fall asleep, and when I awake, I have to continue to count them, never coming to an end, for I am still with Thee." Or, "If I were to start counting your thoughts, I would come to my end, and you would still be there with further thoughts for counting."

**Vv. 19-22:**

- 19 O that thou wouldst slay the wicked, O God,  
and that men of blood would depart from me,  
20 men who maliciously defy thee,  
who lift themselves up against thee for evil!  
21 Do I not hate them that hate thee, O LORD?  
And do I not loathe them that rise up against thee?  
22 I hate them with perfect hatred;  
I count them my enemies.**

This sudden expression of so vindictive a spirit is a surprising turn of thought. To work our way through it we might recall that the Psalmist stands in awe of all the LORD's thoughts and designs. It is furthermore clear that he wants always to say, "I am with you, O LORD, all the way!" In these and the concluding verses he wants to be with the LORD also in Yahweh's struggle with His enemies; he stands with the LORD against the wicked. But the Psalmist who has confessed that he cannot fathom the thoughts and designs of God here seems confident that he does after all know the thoughts and the designs of the LORD. He rightly sees that there are those who rise up against the LORD, but he wrongly assumes that he knows how the LORD will deal with these wicked people. He asks that the LORD, as the stronger power, simply slay them; that is the burden of his petition. And he repeatedly states that he hates in return those who hate the LORD; indeed, he hates them with a perfect, total, no-quarters given hatred. All along he assumes that the LORD too hates in return those who hate Him. But the Psalmist cannot yet know the mind of the LORD in such a situation.

This is traditionally regarded as a Psalm of David. The clue comes in verse 19b: there are "the bloodthirsty" who are fighting against the "me" of this Psalm. And by fighting against "me" they "speak of you maliciously, and lift themselves up against you (O LORD) for evil." Who is it who may assume that malice directed against "me" is malice directed against the LORD? Only the Chosen and the Anointed of the LORD. That is David. But David is the (proto)type of the Greater Son of David who was yet to come, the Chosen of the LORD, the Anointed (the Christ) of the LORD. And Jesus, the Christ and the Son of David, will further reveal the mind of the LORD when confronted with enemies.

The human Jesus was called at his baptism to be the Christ, to be God's beloved Son, and to be the Suffering Servant of God. This Jesus sided with God to the bitter end. By his resurrection from the dead he is revealed as the only one who truly has done the will of God, the only one who had manifested the thoughts and designs of God. Therefore, hostility against Jesus (and -- here's how we get into the picture -- also hostility against the Jesus-followers) indeed proves to be hostility against the LORD who had sent Jesus. In that climate of growing hostility, Jesus continues to side with God his Father; he commits his cause to Him. Hostility against Jesus now defines who the enemies of God really are. But -- and here is the surprising development -- Jesus specifically forbids us to respond to God's enemies with hatred such as is on display in Psalm 139:21-22. In Matthew 5:43ff. Jesus revokes the law under which David operated, namely, the law which endorsed loving your neighbor (that is, your own people, the insider), but which also commanded hating your enemy (that is, the other, the outsider). Jesus' royal, superseding law is

to love your neighbors and to love also even your enemies. Jesus' supreme example is his intercession for his executioners on the Cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And by raising this Son of David from the dead, God signaled that Jesus was indeed the Son of God in whom He was well pleased. So the Apostle Paul also commands, among other things, in Romans 12:17-21: "Beloved (you who have been loved), do not avenge yourselves (get even by repaying hatred with hatred), but rather overcome evil with good. Vengeance belongs to God alone."

### **Conclusion**

**<sup>23</sup> Search me, O God, and know my heart!**

**Try me and know my thoughts!**

**<sup>24</sup> And see if there be any wicked way in me,  
and lead me in the way everlasting!**

This is once more our prayer. To pray it in Christ now means two things:

1. The Psalmist was quite confident that he could pass God's examination. We have been taught by the Word of God and by our own experience under that Word that we need to be exceedingly careful before we claim such confidence. Our confidence in inviting God's close scrutiny cannot possibly be based on our own righteousness; it can be based only upon the righteousness that Christ has given us as a gift to our faith in him. That is the righteousness that will, in the End, have transformed us completely in the image of Christ.
2. Therefore we surely want to join the Psalmist in verse 24. Am I walking a wicked path that leads me farther and farther away from the end for which Christ has redeemed me? So we pray instead, "Lead me in the path of everlasting life." I am on that path when I follow the Spirit of God and keep before me the Face of God (verse 7). They form a kind of Cross-road in my life. It is the road to that reciprocal knowledge of God, when, to use the words of the Apostle Paul, we shall know God as fully as we ourselves are known by Him.

### **The Prayer from the LBW to accompany Psalm 139:**

Lord Jesus Christ, when you descended among the dead, you brought them the light of day; when you ascended into heaven, you brought it new radiance. Remain with us and lead us along the paths of life until we come to rest with your saints in the holy dwelling-place, where with the Father and the Holy Spirit you live and reign, now and forever. Amen.

### **A Further Reflection:**

"How precious to me are your thoughts (designs), O God! How vast is the sum of them!" God is so much *more* than we can imagine. The Psalmist typically thinks in quantitative terms. And we too think in quantitative terms when we seek to think the Creator's thoughts after Him. No matter how far we advance in speaking about God's creative and intelligent design, there always seems to be so much *more* that we do not know. In this way we are led down the path to awe and wonder and praise. But it is worth pondering that God's thoughts and ways are also qualitatively different from our own. Contemplate God's words written in Isaiah 55:8-9: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." He deals with us in ways *other* than we expect. He does not deal with us as we deserve. He does not return our indifference to Him with His indifference to us. He does not repay our human hatred with His divine hatred. God does not exact from us an eye for an eye; instead He gives us His Life for our life. Such thoughts too ought to elicit our praise and thanksgiving.

### **Nugget**

Christ has ...given us a renewed humanity, a...new nature in the sense that the original one has been healed and elevated. Our participation in this new nature is effected by the gift of the Holy Spirit. ... The one who wishes his or her conscience to know the truth will allow the mind to be docile to (that is, teachable by) the Spirit, who always leads one to service of others and to the cross (Philippians 2:5-7). ...Our new relation to God through baptism reconfigures the mind in the same way marriage reconfigures the mind of a single man or woman. It is a whole and entire conversion of life appropriated fully (only) over time. It is a transformation that is intended for the facilitation of union with one's beloved. And it is a transformation that inclines one to listen to the beloved as the primary object of one's love.

James Keating, *Pro Ecclesia*, Fall 1999, p. 479

*Walter E. Keller*

January 16, 2000 – **The Second Sunday after the Epiphany**