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Psalm 139 “The Greatness of God – Part 2”

Intro. This is a theological psalm in that it reveals some of the attributes of God in relation to His creation. Even though we cannot see God, we can know what He is like, because God has revealed Himself to us in His Word.

The attributes of God that we will talk about today relate to His greatness. Here in this Psalm God reveals His omniscience, His omnipresence, and to some degree His omnipotence. These theological terms simply mean that God is all knowing (omniscient), He is everywhere present (omnipresent), and He is all-powerful (omnipotent). He is the Almighty God. This morning we will not only consider the fact of these attributes of God, but what they mean to each of us.

Even more amazing than the greatness of God is the fact that such a great and awesome God would have an intimate, personal relationship with mankind. Elsewhere the psalmist asks, “What is man that You are mindful of him, And the son of man that You visit him?” (Psa. 8:4). Our psalm today shows that God is not a far off, distant God, but He is everywhere present, and close to all. He knows us, and is interested in each of us. He is willing to strengthen us out of the vast resources of His strength! So let’s consider each of these wonderful attributes of God starting with:

I. THE OMNISCIENCE OF GOD

This means that God is all knowing. He knows all things simultaneously. His knowledge is immediate, without the processes of thought, reason, or inference. Now notice from our text:

A. The Examples of the Knowledge of God - The psalmist speaks of the omniscience of God in reference to mankind. He knows us very well. He says in v.1, “O LORD, You have searched me and known me.” The word translated “searched” meant to analyze accurately or thoroughly; to search out, examine, investigate. Then in vv.2-4 he gives some examples of what God knows about us. Let’s see what is included in His omniscience:

1. He Knows Our Actions – In v.2 he says, “You know my sitting down and my rising up. . . .” Our sitting and rising are symbolic of our day to day actions (cf. Deut. 6:7; 11:19; Ps. 127:2). Then in v.3 he says, “You comprehend¹ [or observe] my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.” God takes strict notice of every step we take, every right step and every wrong step. He knows if you go where you shouldn’t be.

It may be fairly obvious to us that God would know our actions. But what’s amazing is:

2. He Knows Our Thoughts – V.2 says, “. . . You understand my thought afar off.” Likewise, Ps. 94:11 says, “The LORD knows the thoughts of man, that they are futile.” God knows us—everything we have ever thought or done, both good and bad. He knows the intentions of our hearts, our very motives, and our plans. You can’t even hide your thoughts from God.

¹ The Hebrew word translated “comprehend” (*zarah*) probably refers to the word picture of the farmer winnowing by throwing grain into the wind. The chaff was blown away, and the part that was left was the valuable seed. The psalmist meant that God sifted him and removed all that was valueless. And what does God sift through? It is our “path.”

Men, when your wife asks you, “Does this dress make me look fat?”, God knows your thoughts. Or if someone ask you how you like their new hair style, God knows your thoughts, and he knows if your words match your thoughts.

This attribute of deity was evident in the life of Jesus. There were many times when He knew what people were thinking. For example, Mt. 12:25 says, “But Jesus knew their thoughts....” Lk. 6:8 says, “But He knew their thoughts....” Such omniscience is one evidence of His deity.

3. He Knows Our Words – In v.4 David says, “For there is not a word on my tongue, but behold, O LORD, You know it altogether.” Jesus said in Matthew 12:36, “But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment.” Idle words are words that are spoken which have no benefit to others. If God will hold us accountable for our words, then surely He knows everyone one of them. So you and I had better be careful of what we say. Remember, Tit 3:2 says that we are “to speak evil of no one....” Likewise, Jas. 4:11 says, “Do not speak evil of one another, brethren.” Even if you whisper such talk to someone, God knows what you are saying.

The fact that God knows our thoughts and words ought to encourage us when we pray. He knows your silent prayers as well as your audible prayers.

B. The Greatness of the Knowledge of God – David says in v.6, “Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; It is high, I cannot attain it.” The word translated “high” implied something that could not be reached. The psalmist recognized that the knowledge of God surpassed all human comprehension. Then he also said in vv.17-18, “How precious also are Your thoughts to me, O God! How great is the sum of them! If I should count them, they would be more in number than the sand....” Indeed, God’s knowledge is perfect and without limit. The most intelligent and brilliant person on earth is only a faint reflection of the glory of God’s omniscience. Psa. 147:4-5 says, “He counts the number of the stars; He calls them all by name....His understanding is infinite.”

C. The Value of His Omniscience – So God is all knowing. What good is that truth to me and to you? How does that theological statement relate to us?

1. He Knows What Is Best For Us - He knows you. He knows me. He is the greatest psychologist. When you have a problem, go to God in prayer. Read His Word. He knows all about us. He knows what you need. He knows the answers to your problems. He is the “wonderful counselor” (Isa. 9:6). Truly, God the Father knows best!

2. It Should Be a Deterrent to Sin - Such omniscience of our actions, words, and thoughts should restrain us from sin.

If a police officer is watching us, we are much less likely to violate the law. Well, we need to remember that God is always watching us! Prov. 15:3 says, “The eyes of the LORD are in every place, keeping watch on the evil and the good.” So the next time you are tempted to sin, remember that God knows all that you do say or think!

But what about the sins that we have already committed? God’s omniscience should help us in that respect as well, for:

3. God Knows Our Sins and Can Help Us See Them – In vv.23-24 David says, “Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me, and know my anxieties; and see if there is any wicked way in me....” The Lord knows us thoroughly. And since we often overlook our own faults, or justify our wrongs, we should earnestly desire and pray to be searched and tested by God’s Word and Spirit. David made clear that he wanted to be saved from self-deception. He is saying, “If there be any wicked way in me, let me see it.”

When He shows us our sin, what should we do?

a) We should confess those sins to God. He already knows about them anyway. He was present when you committed them. So there's no point in trying to hide them from God. But someone may ask, "Why do we need to confess our sins, if God knows about them already?" Well, you do not confess sin for God's benefit as much as for your own benefit. You see, the New Testament meaning of the word "to confess" means to agree with God about our sins.² It is important that you let Him know that you recognize what you have done or said as sin. Until we agree with God that what we have done is wrong, we will surely keep doing that wrong.

b) Forsake it – We should turn from our sin. Isa 55:7 says, "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; Let him return to the LORD, and He will have mercy on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon."

4. He Knows Us, Yet Loves Us – In human relationships there are times when the more we get to know a person, the less we want to be with them. But even though God knows all about us, He actually still loves us, because His love is unconditional. There is a song that says, "He knew me, yet He loved me!" So the omniscience of God is not an occasion for terror for the child of God but for comfort. He saved me even though He knew me. Rom. 5:8 says, "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." God loved us in spite of the fact that He knew the terrible reality of our sin. The Lord knew what Simon Peter was going to do. Yet He chose Him to be an apostle and loved him. Even though we don't understand it, that is the omniscience of God.

In addition to the omniscience of God, the psalmist extols:

II. THE OMNIPRESENCE OF GOD

Jesus said in John 4:24, "God is spirit...." He is not confined to a body, but His presence fills all that is. God is infinite and His presence is infinite. Solomon said in 1 Kings 8:27, "Behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain You." So note with me:

A. The Extent of His Presence – In vv.7-8 David says, "Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend into heaven, You are there...." The word rendered "heaven" is actually plural and includes everything above the earth, especially the atmospheric heaven and the solar heaven. Even if you go to the moon or the farthest star many light years away, God is there. Then he goes on to say in the last of v.8, "If I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there." "Hell" is *Sheol* (not hell), the region of the spirits of the unseen dead. The Israelites did not understand the mystery behind the grave. But they did know that God is there. Then he says in vv.9-10, "If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there Your hand shall lead me, And Your right hand shall hold me." No matter where you go you cannot get away from God. In v.9 the "wings" suggested swiftness and referred to the rapidity with which the morning seems to fly. When he mentioned the "sea" he had in mind the Mediterranean Sea, west of Palestine. The sea was the great, unknown beyond. Thus, he made a poetical contract between the east where the sun rises and the west where it sets, seemingly into the sea. In spite of the vast distances separating the two extremities, God's presence is there. After all, distance is a human term only, and the uttermost parts of the trackless sea are also in the Presence.

Jonah should have understood from this Psalm that his attempt to run from God by boarding a ship was useless. God sent a storm and a great sea creature to return His prophet.

² The Hebrew word (*yadah*) literally means "to throw, shoot, cast."

Then, in vv.11-12 we see that even darkness does not hide us from God. The dark is like light to Him. We may successfully hide from man under the cover of darkness, but not God due to the omnipresence and omniscience of God. The psalmist contended that to hide from God under the cover of darkness was as useless as an attempt to escape from Him by moving from one place to another. And might I add that you won't get away from God even if you go to the moon. So there may have been a time in the poet's life when he felt guilty and tried to escape or hide from God. He learned that such is impossible—there can be no secret crimes. It is hopeless for the wicked to attempt to escape from God.

Have you ever tried to run from God? If so, I'm sure you have found out that you can't do it.

B. The Value of His Omnipresence - God's presence can haunt us. It may be unwelcome and unwanted when we are living in sin. However, there is also great security in the truth of His omnipresence. He is with us, watching over us, protecting us, comforting us, and loving us. The psalmist did not desire to go from the Lord. So God's omnipresence means:

1. Wherever We Go, He Can Lead Us – Even if, from the perspective of the psalmist, we are in the deserts of the far east or the waters of the far west, v.10 says, “Even there Your hand shall lead me.” Though lost at sea God can lead His child home. Then v.12 says, “Indeed, the darkness shall not hide from You...” Though lost in the dark, God can find us, and deliver us to safety.

I saw a program about Jon Stockton, a youth minister, who was kayaking in Hawaii. Jon's plan was to paddle up the western coastline of Hawaii from Kona and camp along the way. The first three days of his journey, the weather was pleasant, the waters calm. But the 4th day a sudden storm came upon him and capsized his kayak. He was being pushed straight out to sea by 20-foot waves. He ended up 20 miles from shore. For the next 21 hours, Jon paddled back toward shore. He couldn't do it. Exhausted, Jon dozed off and his kayak drifted farther and farther from shore. When he woke up, he was sun-burned and helpless. Finally, after praying, he decided to try his cell phone even though he thought he was too far out, and his battery was weak. But to his amazement, he got a dial tone and dialed 911. Jon communicated minimal details and then lost connection. Still, the operator was able to pass on enough information to set a massive search mission into motion. Meanwhile, Jon anxiously awaited his rescue. One plane flew over him 10 times. He said, “I came to the realization, they can't see me—I'm just this little speck in the ocean. They can't see me. I started to feel this absolute dread inside of me.” Then night fell. Delusion set in. Jon remembered a verse from the Psalms, “Save me, O God, for I have sunken down into the pit.”

It was now day five of Jon's perilous journey. He was 80 miles from shore. It was the end of the day when Navy radar operator Gary Phillips urged his pilot to make one last pass. He, too, had been asking God for help. Finally, the pilot saw him. He was rescued and taken to a nearby hospital where he was treated for severe dehydration, sun and wind exposure, and 2nd and 3rd degree burns. Later, when he inquired about the phone call he made at sea, he found that, mysteriously, the phone company had no record of the call.³ God knew where he was the whole time and ensured his rescue.

2. Wherever We Go, He Can Sustain Us – Again, though we travel out to sea, the last of v.10 says, “And Your right hand shall hold me.” The believer cannot be removed from the supporting, comforting presence of his Almighty Friend. Should the persecutor take his life, his soul shall ascend to heaven. The grave cannot separate his body from the love of his Savior, who

³ From http://www.cbn.com/700club/features/amazing/protection_jon_stockton.asp [2005 story].

will raise it a glorious body. No outward circumstances can separate him from his Lord. In fact, the apostle Paul asked in Rom. 8:35, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?..." Nothing shall.

Jesus gave His great commission to make disciples of all nations. What a task! Imagine what it was like for those early missionaries to enter into strange lands. Yet they were to remember the promise of Jesus that followed, "...lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Mt. 28:20).

One should remember that disappointments, sorrows, troubles, cares, and losses—often regarded as darkness—may be conquered through God's comforting presence. Martin Luther, like the psalmist, often had periods of discouragement and depression. At one such time he saw the way his wife was dressed in mourning. Surprised, he asked who had died. "Do you not know?" she replied; "God in heaven is dead." How can you talk such nonsense, Katie?" Luther said. How can God die? Why, He is immortal, and will live through all eternity. "Is that really true?" she asked. "Of course," Luther said, "how can you doubt it?" "And yet," she said, "though you do not doubt that, yet you are so hopeless and discouraged." Then Luther said, he observed what a wise woman his wife was.

III. THE OMNIPOTENCE OF GOD

The fact that God is omnipotent means that God is all-powerful. His own name for Himself in Gen. 17:1 and elsewhere is *El Shaddai*, "God Almighty." Because God is omnipotent, He is able to do the miracles that we read about in the Bible.

Here in this Psalm the author just touches on the omnipotence of God in view of His creative power. Yet the focus of the psalmist is not God's creation of the sun, moon, and the stars, or even the earth. Rather, he focuses on the creative power and genius of God that is on display every time a child is conceived, grows in the womb, and is born.

A. The Creative Power of God - In v.13 David said, "For You formed my inward parts; You covered me in my mother's womb." The word "You" was made emphatic. God is our Creator. We did not arrive on earth through the process of evolutionary chance. Then he goes on to say in vv.14-16, "I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Marvelous are Your works, And that my soul knows very well. My frame was not hidden from You, When I was made in secret, And skillfully wrought in the lowest parts of the earth. Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed...." The very formation of a person in their mother's womb is an illustration of the creative work of God. The word "fearfully" came from a term that meant to produce awe or reverence. It is amazing how God creates a human in the womb starting with just two cells. In just a few weeks the child has a brain and a beating heart. Soon it develops arms and legs and other vital organs. In just 12 weeks the unborn child bears the image of humanity. We should be awestruck by the creative power of God.

Other Scriptures speak of other evidences of the fact that God is omnipotent. Rom. 1:20 says, "For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead...." Psa. 19:1 says, "The heavens declare the glory of God; And the firmament shows His handiwork." Just think of the power of God as seen in the sun. In just 1 second the sun generates more energy than has been used in all of mankind's history (learnastronomyhq.com). The amount of watts of energy from the sun is a number that is more than we can comprehend. And when you consider that the sun is just a small

star in a universe of billions and billions of much larger stars, only the Almighty God could be the source of such creative power!

B. The Proper Responses to the Omnipotence of God - Since God is Almighty, we should respond to that truth in the following ways:

1. Praise – David says in v.14, “I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made....” The word “praise” meant to confess openly and freely, to confess or celebrate publicly one’s feelings. The poet marveled at God’s creation from conception to birth. Thoughtful persons still do (See Job 10:8-11). The more we learn about the human body and the natural world, the more we should stand in awe and worship.

2. Obedience - How foolish it is to disobey the one who holds such unlimited power. That is one reason why the psalmist says in vv. 23-24, “Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me, and know my anxieties; and see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.” The psalmist wanted God to correct him that he would obey Him.

3. Fear and Reverence - In v.19 David says, “Oh, that You would slay the wicked, O God!” God certainly has the power to do so, yet the psalmist wondered why God hasn’t done so to the many wicked who walked the earth. The problem is certainly not a lack of power on God’s part but it is a matter of timing. Ultimately God will judge the wicked. How foolish it is for people to live without any fear and reverence of such an Almighty God.

4. Trust in God to Empower Us - Since God is Almighty and his power is never exhausted, let us trust in Him to strengthen us when our own strength is an adequate. Isa. 40:31 says, “But those who wait on the LORD shall renew their strength....” Philippians 4:13 says, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” In 2 Cor. 12:9 God said to the apostle Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.” Eph. 3:16 says, “that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man.” Eph. 6:10 says, “Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might.” So no matter how great the challenge, or how weak you become, we serve the Almighty God who can strengthen us and never grow weary.

5. Pray Accordingly! – Since God is Almighty, we ought to pray with faith in God’s power to do great things. Eph. 3:20 says, “Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us.”

Sources: Steve Felker (outline, part of sermon tape of 12/10/95; rest is missing); Matthew Henry *Unabridged Commentary*; Alton H. McEachern, *Layman’s Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1981); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 2 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1982); G. Campbell Morgan, *Notes on the Psalms* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1947); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [CD-ROM] (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); Fred M. Wood, *Psalms: Songs from Life* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1984). Nothing available from Maclaren.

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