*Submitting to the Inescapable Presence of God*

Psalm 139:17-24

7/30/23

Today we conclude our study of Psalm 139. In vs. 1-16, the focus was on the character of God. We have talked about His omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence, or that God knows everything, is relationally present everywhere, and has the power to accomplish His perfect will in all circumstances. In contemplating these things, we encounter the transcendence to God. He is wholly other. The vastness of His character and depth of His nature is not only beyond our ability to describe, but it can be overwhelming. Yet the psalm has also confronted us with the imminence of God, as He is intimately concerned about and involved in our lives. He searches and knows us and is intimately acquainted with all our ways. There is no where we can go to escape His presence as He providentially rules over our lives. Psalm 139 is describing an inescapable, all-searching God before whom our lives are laid bare.

The closing portion of the song shifts from describing the wonder of who God is to how we should respond to Him. Obviously, there are many applications we could draw from the truths we have considered, but the Spirit compelled David to highlight three things that flow from the description of God earlier in the song.

First, because God possesses all knowledge, we should love His truth. Think about this. Everything that can be known is known by God. He ordered the laws of gravity long before Isaac Newton described them. This God whose knowledge of the world and of us is mind-blowing, does not keep knowledge to Himself. In His love and mercy, He has revealed truth to us in creation, in His word, and ultimately through His Son. Now the knowledge gained from creation is limited. And the only place for us to learn about His Son today is the Bible. Thankfully, the bible tells us everything we need to know to live a life that pleases God (2 Tim. 3:16-17). It is the window through which we can see the mind of God. It is God’s second greatest gift to us, second only to the gift of His Son our Savior.

In response to the knowledge that God has revealed to mankind, David says *how precious also are Your thoughts to me, O God!* David had a deep love for God’s word. I take him to be the author of Psalm 119, which is a 176-verse song focused on God’s word and its role in our lives. In vs. 103-105 he wrote *How sweet are Your words to my taste! Yes, sweeter than honey to my mouth! From Your precepts I get understanding; therefore, I hate every false way. Your word is a lamp unto my feet and a light to my path.* David loved God’s word.

Not only did he love the Scriptures, but he understood the inexhaustible nature of them. *How vast is the sum of them. If I should count them, they would outnumber the sand.* We hold in our hands a treasure chest of truth that we can never wear out. In the Bible, God lets us into the inner circle of His mind. The greatest thinkers in the history of the world have spent their lifetimes studying this book; yet no person can say they have exhausted the mind of God revealed in the Scriptures. It would be easier for us to count the grands of sand on earth than it would be to find every nugget of truth in the Bible. We can read it every day of our lives and never exhaust it.

Finally, we are reminded of the personal nature of God’s truth. *When I awake, you are still with me.* Our concern should not be so much about the abstract truths of the Bible, but rather to see both God and us clearly through the lens of His word. The more we hide God’s word in our hearts, the more God’s truth will fashion our lives. Abiding in Christ begins with knowing Christ as He has revealed Himself in His word.

One thing we will give an account to God for on judgment day is what we have done with the truths God gave us. No generation in the history of the world has had easier access to the word of God than we do. Yet biblical literacy is at an all-time low among professing Christians in the US. That is not because they don’t teach the bible in school. It is because we are deficient in our love for God’s truth. If it was precious to us, we would prioritize it. Our actions reveal our heart.

Now, there is a simple solution to our deficiency. Pick of the Bible and read. If you will read for 15 minutes a day, you can cover the entire bible in a year. As you read it, two things will happen. 1) your knowledge of God will grow; 2) your love for His word will grow. There comes a point in time when missing time in God’s word is painful, for His thoughts are precious to us.

The second application David makes is this: *because God is relationally present everywhere, we should develop a proper distain for sin and those who perpetrate it*. Vs. 19-22 challenge some of common thoughts we have towards sin and sinners. Several commentaries I looked at act try to downplay the force with which David expresses his disdain for the wicked. It is hard to match these statements with other statements made in the bible like *love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you* (Mt. 5:44). Yet these verses tell us that we need a place in our theology and our practice, not only to hate sin, but to have a proper disdain for evildoers.

In the first two stanzas, but especially in vs. 7-12, there is a desire to flee God’s presence (see vs. 7). This is because of sin in our lives. God is holy, meaning that He is absolute perfection in all ways at all times. He cannot abide sin in His presence. This reality causes us to try to flee from Him. Yet all such attempts fail, for we cannot escape the omnipresent one.

Salvation changes our disposition towards God and sin. Before salvation, sin caused us to flee God because we were not right with Him. After salvation, our renewed relationship with God causes us to flee sin. David expresses this changed attitude in three ways in this text. First, He asks God to judge sinners: *O that You would slay the wicked, O God.* The just consequence of sin is death. David is asking God to execute justice on those who act wickedly. Without forgetting that we are debtors to His grace and desiring that others experience it too, we should desire for justice to be executed on God’s enemies and rejoice when it is.

Second, David seeks to distance himself from wicked men. *Depart from me, therefore, men of bloodshed, for they speak against You wickedly, and Your enemies take Your name in vain.* David is not describing sinners in general here. Rather, he is focusing on those who are intentionally resisting God by pursuing evil. He has the instigators of evil in mind, highlighting three things they do: 1) they unjustly shed blood; 2) they oppose God and His ways; 3) they take His name in vain. David wants nothing to do with such people. He tells them to depart his presence, for he prefers fellowship with God over the companionship of sinners.

Before I move off this point, I feel compelled to address something. Christians today do not actively shed blood or speak against God wickedly; yet I hear a steady stream of *O My God* coming from Christians’ mouths. This is to take His name in vain, and it speaks to our callousness towards the greatness and grandeur of who He is. His name should only be spoken in endearing, affectionate, and respectful ways.

So David asks God to judge sinners while he distances himself from them. This is because he disdains those who promote evil. David says *Do I not hate those who hate You, O Lord? And do I not loathe those who rise up against You? I hate them with the utmost hatred; they have become my enemies.* It is here that we must think carefully. We often use the phrase *hate the sin but love the sinner.* We say that because we are trying to capture both God’s distain for sin and love for those who commit sin. I understand and commend the desire. Yet there must also be a place in our theology for loathing those who rise up against the Lord.

D.A. Carson made this observation about the phrase *hate the sin but love the sinner*: 14 times in the first 50 psalms alone, we are told that God hates the sinner, His wrath is on the liar, and so forth. In the Bible the wrath of God rests both on the sin and on the sinner. We need space in our thinking for such a disposition towards the perpetrators of evil. David’ love for God’s holiness caused him to despise those who assault it.

Now, there is mystery in this. Finding the proper balance is not easy. How do we properly reflect God’s love for sinners (Jn. 3:16) and His opposition to them as His enemies? I do not have a simple answer to that question. The Spirit must teach us how to do both well. But we must recognize that love and hate are not necessarily exclusive qualities. God demonstrated His own love for us in that, while we were yet sinners (and therefore enemies), Christ died for us. God poured His wrath on His Son so He could remain just while justifying the one who has faith in Jesus. God’s hatred for evil never diminishes; yet He neither does His love for sinners.

Now, I found it helpful this week was when I realized that David is not talking about all sinners. He has in mind those who knowledgeably and intentionally oppose God, using their influence to lead others into the black abyss of sin. We should loathes such perpetrators of evil.

Let me give two quick examples of what I think the text has in mind. A while back Gavin Newsome ran a billboard sign quoting Scripture in support of abortion. It was blasphemous. We should loathe him for trying to put God’s seal of approval on his perpetration of evil. It is right for us to say *depart from me you man of bloodshed* and to ask God to deal with him properly. We can do that while extending the gospel to those whose choices have led them down that dark path.

Similarly, I think we should look on the countless young men and women who are confused over matters gender and sexuality with compassion, desiring that God would save them. Many of them have been groomed into this lifestyle by predators. We should loathe those who, in full awareness of what they are doing, groom people into this sinful worldview, while earning for the salvation of the community that is mired in this sin.

Now, we must be cautious with this principle. In learning to distain sin and those who perpetrate it, we must not assume the role of God. Only He knows when, where, and how to properly judge sinners; that is not something we should do. We are searching for balance. If we show indiscriminate love, we go soft on sin; yet if we over-cultivate our distain for sinners, we forget that Christ came to seek and save sinners. We will be vengeful, angry, self-righteous hypocrites who want God’s mercy for ourselves but His wrath for everyone else. These are hard truths to wrestle with, for there is no formula I can give you or checklist we can follow to know that we are properly balancing God’s love for sinners and God’s wrath for sinners. Yet His constant presence in our lives, coupled with the fact that we are His people, should cause us hate sin and those who intentionally perpetrate it in opposition to God.

The difficulty of finding balance in these points of tension leads to our final point. *Because God providentially rules every aspect of our lives, we should seek and submit to His evaluation of us*. The song ends where it began. In vs. 1, we saw that God searches and knows us. He scrutinizes our path and is intimately acquainted with all our ways. He is an inescapable, all-searching presence. The psalm ends by telling us to submit to it rather than run from it.

David asks God to evaluate his life: *search me, O God, and know my heart. Try me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there be any hurtful way in me.* Since David cannot escape God, he yields to Him. It is not that he thinks God needs to run a diagnostic of his life so He can maintain His omniscience. Rather, David is asking God to show him the inner working of his heart, to expose the reason for his anxious thoughts, and to reveal if there is any hurtful way in him. David is asking God to reveal how He views him. David wants to know so he can modify his behavior. Not only does David want to distance himself from those who perpetrate evil, but he wants to distance himself from the practice of evil. He wants to know God’s evaluation of him so he can draw nearer to God. This is what rests behind the statement *lead me in the everlasting way.*

This is the desire of every true follower of God. Because God has delivered us from sin and all that goes with it, we desire to rid ourselves of sin and walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which we have been called. Paul expresses a similar sentiment in 2 Corinthians 13:5 when he tells us to *test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you – unless you fail the test?* Our self-examination is a plea for the Spirit to show us who we truly are, to affirm our faith, and to transform us into the image of His Son. David’s plea a the end of this song should be the daily cry of our hearts. God show us who we are, show us what we should be, and help us move from here to there. When that plea is couple with the daily pursuit of God in His word, growth will come.

We have this great and mighty God who, despite all His vastness is intimately involved in our lives. May we love Him sincerely, flee the sin that deeply offends Him, and seek His evaluation of our lives so that we might rid ourselves of any barrier we may throw in the way of having a deeply abiding relationship with God.

*O God, may You count us worthy of Your calling, and fulfill every desire for goodness and the work of faith with power, so that the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in us, and us in Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

*Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God our Father, who has loved us and given us eternal comfort and good hope by grace, comfort and strengthen your hearts in every good work and word.*