

“Psalm 139, Uncensored”

Psalm 139
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Context matters. Whom might we imagine as the speakers of this complicated Psalm? What might their roles have been in ancient Jerusalem?

What about a mother? In the first 18 verses, she may envision a God who, like a fellow mother, has searched and deeply known her children; when they sit down and rise up; a mother who knows her children’s thoughts from far away. A mother who knows—or who desperately longs to know—the paths her children choose to walk, where they take their rest. A mother who can anticipate what we say even before we say it, and from whose grasp we can never really escape.¹

A friend of mine, herself a mother, recently shared with me—a new father—that even after the umbilical cord is cut, there’s a bond between mother and child that can never be severed. To that, the only adequate response seems to be that “[s]uch knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.”² That inseparable bond makes it impossible for us to escape our mother, and so the mother psalmist’s image of God is one that abides with us wherever we find ourselves: anywhere on earth, anytime in life and in death, any place regardless of how bright or how dim.³

Mother knows what it means to have her child knit together inside her. Her understanding that her children, that God’s children, are “fearfully and wonderfully made” could not be more real. In verse 15, mother sees even beyond herself, beyond the womb, when she considers the primordial substance at the root of her child’s life—when that little one was the merest thought, the smallest twinkle in the eye, whose “frame...was...made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth,” whose days are numbered by something we can only imagine as God. And no matter how short or long, mother knows those days are all too few.⁴

How weighty, indeed, are God’s thoughts; how weighty a mother’s thoughts! How vast the sum of them! They cannot be counted. And at the end of it all, that inseparable bond has endured.⁵

Context matters. So how might a soldier read this Psalm?

In place of the mother’s soothing tone, a frantic, paranoid, nearly nihilistic cry rails against the one aspect of reality the soldier can’t hide from: the inescapable God. This is God who has searched and known the war-ravaged thoughts and words and deeds of a survivor, despite his wish for peace and privacy. This is the God who knows the paths too few veterans dare re-trod. All the good and terrible the soldier has done for God and country; none of it can be sanitized or edited from memory for a God who fought in the battles and endured in the silences. That God would know all this...is perhaps not only too wonderful, but too difficult to imagine.⁶

¹ Cf. Psalm 139: 1-5.

² Ps. 139: 6.

³ Ps 139: 7-12.

⁴ Ps. 139: 13-17

⁵ Ps. 139: 18.

⁶ Ps. 139: 1-6; see Carolyn Pressler, “Certainty, Ambiguity, and Trust: Knowledge of God in Psalm 139” in Brent A. Strawn and Nancy R. Bowen, eds., *A God So Near: Essays on Old Testament Theology in Honor of Patrick D. Miller* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 95-96.

All the camouflage can't hide the soldier from God. When he cries out, "where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?", these are not rhetorical questions: the soldier wants to get away, and the futility of his effort is maddening.⁷

Slowly the words of verses 13-18 turn toward the soldier's resignation, that this inescapable God is responsible for the fearful and wonderful person defending the causes of justice. To some, the soldier is a terrorist; to others, an imperialist; still others know him only as a messenger of chaos. Yet God knows each of the chaos-filled days of the soldier before he was a twinkle in anyone's eye; and whenever and however he comes to his end, he abides with God.

Perhaps the turn to verse 19 is abrupt...but perhaps not. Perhaps this is the first time many of you have heard this portion of the Psalm. We should probably ask ourselves: haven't the ancient mother and the ancient soldier, the mothers and soldiers and other ordinary people of today; haven't we all had quite enough of hating each other? Haven't we had enough loathing? Doesn't Jesus tell us to love our enemies?⁸

Yes. And yet...and yet how unapologetically real these verses are. How terribly, shamefully, honestly human they are. They expose all the rage welled beneath the thin façade of manners and morals and "being a good Christian." They dare give voice to the uncensored truth that—no matter who you are—life is not perfect; that we all have a capacity to loathe and hate and make enemies, even to the point that we may wish the ultimate judgment—death and damnation—upon other people, upon other children made in the divine image.

Context matters. It matters that, as the collected hymns of ancient Jerusalem, the Psalms were reshaped and reformed over centuries, winding through the highs and lows of Israel's rise to and fall from power. It matters that—among the many characters whose stories could have shaped Psalm 139—the mother's and the soldier's voices were fused together by tradition.⁹ And it matters that their voices form a larger, even if a messy, whole; a whole picture of what it means to be human in a world where God is over all and through all and in all;¹⁰ for better, and for worse. Just as the Exodus tradition was picked up, reinterpreted, and helped lay the foundation for many of the people who were enslaved in this country to birth their own freedom, so too can Psalm 139 speak from the past into the present: to a mother soothing her children, to a soldier crying out in despair, to each of us caught up in the beauty and tragedy of imperfect lives, accompanied by a God who knows us in a way that, at times, will be deeply comforting, and at times radically unsettling.

So, how then shall we live?

Shall we edit and sanitize and pretend—pretend that the wickedness and hatred and loathing that infuse our lives aren't real? There are impulses in our tradition that wish we would look away from verses 19-22. Our very own lectionary wanted us to hear only the first 12 verses of Psalm 139, adding verses 23 and 24 seemingly as an afterthought. But if we wish to face the whole of reality, we do well to face the whole Psalm; for there can be no recognition that the wicked ways of verse 24 lie within us, without voicing the reality of the verses before: the reality that we have enemies; that we can hate with perfect hatred; and that we can—and all too often do—muster that hate to kill. Uncensoring the Psalm, with all its ambiguity and complexity on display, brings it into the fullness of the human condition. The mother and the soldier within us rejoice, cry out, lash out, and, finally, invite trust. Grammatically, linguistically, poetically speaking, the Psalm has been arranged so that all of us engage in the intentionally ambiguous task of hearing these words as if spoken to or uttered by us.¹¹ What may sound like blessed assurance to a mother comforting her child can just as easily be painfully voyeuristic to the soldier racked by the trauma and torture of war.

⁷ Ps. 139: 7-12.

⁸ Matt. 5: 44; Lk. 6: 27.

⁹ For more on the composition, genres, settings and authorship of the Psalms, see *HarperCollins Study Bible* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2006), 732-735.

¹⁰ Eph. 4: 6.

¹¹ Pressler, "Certainty, Ambiguity, and Trust," 91-96.

And so we arrive at verse 23. Our collective paths converge here. After we have sought comfort with the mother and cried out in agony with the soldier, after we have faced the reality and brutality of the fear and hate raging within us, we turn toward God. Perhaps we're thrilled about it, perhaps we're terrified, perhaps we're just tired and weary from the journey. The path to this point has been winding. As our Stated Clerk, Rev. Dr. J. Herbert Nelson observed on Palm Sunday, "our sanitized view of ourselves and the Church has become the impediment of our faith," and we forget that "ministry is messy."¹² Indeed: we forget that we are messy.

We began the Psalm recognizing that, in the past, God had searched and known us; now we ask God, in verse 24 and in our present moment, to search us and to know us. We have journeyed through the fullness of our experiences, not shying away from the smallest details, the grandest observations, or the fits of our fear and hatred. We have faced all that life has thrown at us. We need not retreat any longer. We are invited to open ourselves to our messy, unsanitized, ambiguous future, to ask God to see if there is any wicked way in us, and to lead us in that everlasting, that most ancient of ways.¹³

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Context matters. In a time such as ours, there are voices that ask us to look away from our fear and hatred. Psalm 139 invites us in: to face the fear that we may lose—or that we have already lost—what we hold most dear. We are invited to recognize the hate that we harbor for the person, the people, yes, even the God who has taken too much from us. To face these fears, to stare down the best and the worst that life has thrown at us, and to comprehend that God has been—and always will be—alongside us through everything, even life and death: that is the path we walk, trod before us by the One whose way we follow, who lived the reality that in the messiness of life and the tragedy of death, we belong to God.

For the example of that ancient, everlasting way Christ invites us to walk, for the courage given to us to face all that life throws at us, and for the mystery of discovering the unfathomable, inescapable God along the journey, I say thanks be to God. Amen.

¹² Rev. Dr. J. Herbert Nelson, *Ticker Tape and Shattered Expectations*, <http://www.hohchurch.org/sites/default/files/Ticker%20Tape%20and%20Shattered%20Expectations.pdf>, sermon delivered April 9, 2017, House of Hope Presbyterian Church, St. Paul, MN

¹³ *HarperCollins Study Bible*, 842, footnote d.