



Psalms Schedule

May 20 Psalm 8 Who is the Rock?

May 27 Psalm 25 Who is the Man?

(Memorial Day Weekend)

June 3 Psalm 107 Oh Give Thanks!

June 10 Psalm 139 Where Shall I go?

Psalm 139

The Lord knows me but do I know Him?

Overview

Psalm 139 is often seen as a clear description of Yahweh's omnipotence and omniscience. It certainly has important things to say about those topics, but it must not be divorced from its emphasis on the personal relationship of God able to find out whatever he wants to about someone. But often times we neglect that this is all connected to one of the tension filled prayers to kill enemies of the Lord. The Psalm ends with a prayer that God would kill murderous liars and search the Psalmist to see if they are committed to the Lord and his ways. Whether one sees the Psalm in general as giving good news or bad news probably says more about them than it does the Lord.

Present Context

This Psalm brings good news or bad news depending on how one reads it. The idea that God knows everything about you better than you know yourself can be very encouraging and uplifting for those hungering to be known, but they may struggle with how the Psalm ends. On the other hand, someone may be quite ashamed of themselves and understand the last few verses and be discouraged by the fact God knows everything they have ever done. Both would benefit from being stretched to read the Psalm the way the other person does. That is precisely what makes it powerful, is its ambiguity. It is both encouraging and frightening that the Lord knows everything about us personally. The reality of God's intimate knowledge of us is that we are then forced to ask ourselves - am I really committed to him and his ways? Do I really mean "kill your enemies for they are mine also"? The question is - do you?

Cultural Context

139:1-6 Ancient people and knowledge of the gods - Ancient people generally believe deities knew everything. But it was often in the context of judgement. God knows everything he needs to know to make a wise and fair decision. They did not necessarily believe a god knew everything that was to know, but rather that the god knew everything he needed to know or was not limited by anything in the deity's boundless wisdom.

139:7-12 Ancient people and omnipresence - Ancient people did not have a concept of omnipresence they way Christian theology does. They generally believed gods were localized to a specific geographic region. Their concept of gods was that they were able to *see* all. As the Sun god being a judge who sees all during the day and then descends to the netherworld and sees all there at night.¹ It is basically similar to things like "the Great Eye of Mordor" in Tolkien's

¹ Victor Harold Matthews, Mark W. Chavalas and John H. Walton, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary : Old Testament*, electronic ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), Ps 139:4.

Lord of the Rings. Even in this Psalm it is not necessarily teaching that Yahweh is every where, but that he has access to every place. He is not limited spatially. Other verses speak more to God being present everywhere than this one.

Bible Context

Psalm 139:19-24 - It is very important to recognize the Psalmist is not asking the Lord to kill *their* enemies, but *Yahweh's* enemies. To be sure, they see themselves and even ask that the Lord examine them to make sure they are trusting in him, but the heart and concern is for the Lord. This is an important Biblical distinction about anger and whether it is righteous or unrighteous. Unrighteous anger is focused on ourselves. Righteous anger is focused on God and other people. Jesus calls disciples to hate their own families (Lk. 14:26). One must be more committed to following him than to following their family members. We are called to love our enemies, but we are not called to love enemies of Yahweh.²

Biblical Omniscience, Classical vs. Open Theism - This passage is frequently cited in defense of God's omniscience - that is that God knows everything a being like him can know. Today there are some who argue for Open Theism, that God does not know the future but is powerful enough anyway to accomplish his purposes. They oppose the Classical view that God's knowledge is exhaustive - that he knows everything there is to know about the past, present, and future. It is important to recognize that sometimes descriptions of "Classical Theism" reflect more the Medieval God of philosophy who was utterly transcendent, determined every detail of life, and impassable (that he did not even change his emotional state). This Psalm pushes against both Open Theism and the cold stoic God of Medieval philosophers. To be precise, it is about God finding out everything he wants about the Psalmist. He almost implies he does not already know, at least experientially in that God tested Abraham "to know" if he trusted Him. Against Open Theism it does say he knows the very beginning and the end of the writer's days, that he does in fact know the future. However, we should be careful about the extent of this knowledge and must distinguish between knowledge of facts or concepts and experiential personal knowledge.

Passage Context

139:1-6 Yahweh knows everything about me - This Psalm is not a description of abstract concepts of God. It is a description of God's very personal and relational attributes. The first section progress from the Lord knowing me, to knowing what I do, to knowing my very thoughts. The verbs themselves are quite personal where "searched" means to investigate something like when the Lord tested Abraham to know that he feared him (Gen. 22:1, 12). The second occurrence of "search" (v. 3) is a different word that means extending a hand to get the dimensions of something. That God "measures" us by how actions to find out what we got. His knowledge of us is beyond us. He knows more about us than we do.³

² John Goldingay, *The Psalms*, vol. 1 (Nashville, TN: Baker Academic, 2008), 249, 639.

³ *Ibid.*, 629.

139:7-12 Yahweh knows everywhere I go - The reach of Yahweh knows no bounds. The writer desires to flee, perhaps because of murderous liars (vv.19-24), but cannot. Yahweh reaches the west beyond the Mediterranean, into to Sheol, and even the darkness. This reminds one of Jonah seeking to flee to the west. And of God's power to resurrect one from the grave, and that even darkness cannot hid us from his gaze.

139:13-18 Yahweh knows me from beginning to end - The reach of the Lord is not limited by time. He is eternal and he knew the writer in the womb and thus because he knows their origins, he knows what lies in their future. The cryptic phrase of v.16b indicates God knows our future. This section is used often when it comes to issues of abortion. Its particular contribution is the wonder of God's involvement even in the womb and the course of the life he has begun. It is not simply a matter of one's choice about what to do with their body for the woman is not the only one involved, but Yahweh himself.

139:19-24 Yahweh's enemies are mine - This is the part of the Psalm many people stop reading. The writer hates completely and totally those who are killing other people and lying about it. He hates them because they oppose Yahweh himself and are committing injustices against others. The Psalmist ends where he began and explains what essentially is the point of Yahweh knowing us so deeply - that we would be committed to him and his ways. He would search us and see if we are truly committed to him and willing to oppose those who oppose him. This may not seem very Christianly, but it in fact is (cf. Luke 14:26).

Questions

Explanation

1. What do vv.1-6 say about what Yahweh knows about us?
2. What do vv.7-12 say about Yahweh's presence?
3. What do vv. 13-18 say about Yahweh's involvement in our lives?
4. How do Jesus' words in Luke 14:26 shine light on the meaning of Psalm 139:19-24?

Discussion

5. How would you describe God's omniscience? How might you nuance it? (e.g. Does God know sin, has he experienced it? Does he exhaustively know every detail about the future and thus predetermined it?) *Don't debate this for too long. The point of the question is merely to push people beyond simplistic and shallow understandings - to listen to other people and not jump to conclusions. See comments in Bible context.*
6. Why is the distinction in vv.19-24 between *our* enemies and *Yahweh's* enemies important?

Application

7. Do you find the intimate description of Yahweh's knowledge of you personally encouraging or discouraging? Why?
8. What do you find challenging about the end of Psalm?
9. In what ways has the Lord shown you attitudes or actions that are not in line with his ways?

Resources

Psalms, Goldingay, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament: Wisdom and Psalms

The Bible Jesus Read, Philip Yancey