

Fearfully and Wonderfully Made: A Bible Study

Psalms 139

Psalms 139 says a lot about the sanctity of human life. It provides perhaps the most unmistakable and memorable proclamation of it in all the Scriptures. These verses express humankind's preciousness—the entire race's every member—not only upon our earliest days but along with the rest of them as well until beyond their end.

But this hymn confesses as much about the Heavenly Father as it does about those He brings forth. With a poet's sentiments, a composer's lyrics, and a playwright's scenes, its four stanzas celebrate His comprehension, His presence, His power, and His compassion. More than academic discourse, we receive relational language, moving us to prayer like a microscope scans a masterpiece. And its serious turn toward the conclusion testifies to the great worth of these realities. We dare not dismiss Almighty God as if distant or uninterested, and we need not disregard any neighbors as though not yet or no longer persons with purpose.

1. What went on in your earliest memory?
2. Which person in the world do you believe knows you “inside and out”?
3. When you feel like hiding, where you do you most often go? Why do you go there?
4. What might it imply that the Lord God inhabits every place and situation (Jeremiah 23:23-24; Psalm 56:8; Isaiah 41:10)? How does His presence differ from mere bystanding and onlooking? What could it mean that He knows all things (Psalm 90:8; Matthew 4:15; Matthew 6:6-8; John 10:2-4; 1 Corinthians 13:12)? And how does this affect our mistakes and failures?
5. Which of the following circumstances or experiences do you think makes a person feel farthest from the Heavenly Father: (a) tragedy and loss, (b) transgression and guilt, (c) leisure and luxury, (d) anxiety and violence, or (e) isolation and abandonment? Why?

6. Life issues include (a) visible circumstances that cause immediate or intentional death to a neighbor, (b) failure to meet a neighbor's needs that results in death, (c) actions or policies that undermine God's design for bodies and relationships, and (d) attitudes or perspectives that disregard a person's worth. What situations can you think of that correspond to each of these criteria? How does this psalm give voice to the fear and distress they bring about?
7. Does it come across as more of a caution or a comfort that "You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me"? Why?
8. What do the depths of the earth have in common with the human womb?
9. What other Scriptures further testify to the sacredness of human conception and gestation? What additional Scriptures affirm to whom the human body belongs, both our neighbor's and our own, no matter what age, appearance, or ability?
10. Which words of this psalm articulate the forgiveness our Savior's crucifixion has enacted? Which words convey the hope our Lord's resurrection has inaugurated? And why might these promises prove particularly appropriate to each of the life issues identified above?
11. What do you make of the hate speech (Psalm 139:21-22)? What does it mean to hate? Does the definition take different senses in certain contexts? Does God hate? If so, what and why? What characteristics might differentiate divine understanding from our own? Can hate coexist with the sanctity of human life? If not, why not, and if so, how?
12. The title, "To the Choirmaster," appears to indicate an intended public setting. What other dimensions of this psalm suggest it addresses matters of corporate concern, common good, and shared life? What do you think its personal/relational aspects and celebratory tones imply? How might these considerations inform and influence our sanctity of life witness?

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Opening Prayer: O Lord, our Heavenly Father, You have intimately and meticulously knit us each together from the moment of conception in our mother's womb. Your Son's incarnation among us continues to make us fully known to You, and Your Holy Spirit precedes and beholds us wherever we go. Grant us to trust Your compassion, Your presence, and Your power that we put away from us all things harmful to our eternal welfare and our neighbor's dignity. Make us courageous and cheerful to declare Your wonders and demonstrate Your goodness; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

1. What went on in your earliest memory?

Responses vary. I recall receiving a model train from my grandparents during a party at their house for my third birthday.

2. Which person in the world do you believe knows you "inside and out"?

Responses vary. My wife knows my tendencies better than I can interpret them myself.

3. When you feel like hiding, where you do you most often go? Why do you go there?

Responses vary. I usually retreat to my bedroom, lie down, and close my eyes. Sleep has long provided a refuge for me from outside (invasive?) stimuli.

4. What might it imply that the Lord God inhabits every place and situation (Jeremiah 23:23-24; Psalm 56:8; Isaiah 41:10)? How does His presence differ from mere bystanding and onlooking? What could it mean that He knows all things (Psalm 90:8; Matthew 4:15; Matthew 6:6-8; John 10:2-4; 1 Corinthians 13:12)? And how does this affect our mistakes and failures?

Our Heavenly Father accompanies us everywhere. He witnesses our sorrows and our celebrations. But He does not merely observe without intervening, always active and almighty for our good. In fact, He identifies with our experiences and makes them His own by coming in the person of Jesus Christ. He knows our sinful motivations, intentions, attitudes, and actions. He also remains aware of our past and our future, and He has intimate familiarity with our needs and weaknesses. The Lord our God understands us entirely and holds us dear. We cannot, ought not, and need not hide our sinfulness from Him because He attends us in spite of them.

5. Which of the following circumstances or experiences do you think makes a person feel farthest from the Heavenly Father: (a) tragedy and loss, (b) transgression and guilt, (c) leisure and luxury, (d) anxiety and violence, or (e) isolation and abandonment? Why?

Responses vary. Tragedy and loss may open distance because of the sense of grief, emptiness, and resentment. Transgression and guilt may inflict disconnect because of one's shame and fear of punishment. Leisure and luxury could divide by the indulgence, complacency, and pride they bring about. Anxiety and violence could wreak detachment by shock and panic, overwhelming heart and mind with emergencies. Isolation and abandonment can impose disassociation because they provoke a withdrawal into oneself, and when neighbors forsake, one suspects God may as well.

6. Life issues include (a) visible circumstances that cause immediate or intentional death to a neighbor, (b) failure to meet a neighbor's needs that results in death, (c) actions or policies that undermine God's design for bodies and relationships, and (d) attitudes or perspectives that disregard a person's worth. What situations can you think of that correspond to each of these criteria? How does this psalm give voice to the fear and distress they bring about?

Examples include:

(a) abortion, physician-assisted suicide, embryo-destroying biotechnologies, genocide

(b) neglect, homelessness and poverty, indifference to bodily suffering and basic necessities

- (c) homosexuality and transgenderism, promiscuity and prostitution, divorce, human trafficking
- (d) xenophobia and racism, misogyny and misandry, slavery

Expressions like “Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night,” “Oh that you would slay the wicked, O God! O men of blood, depart from me!,” and even ““You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me,” among others, capture such concerns.

7. Does it come across as more of a caution or a comfort that “You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me”? Why?

The encompassing closeness and control of Almighty God serve as a caution against transgressing His explicit commandments. He does not overlook, ignore, or disregard the offenses that His creatures commit toward one another and toward Him. His proximity and dominion also ultimately prove a comfort because He has drawn near in His Son with His Spirit to protect His children, provide for them, and incorporate them into His everlasting heavenly communion.

8. What do the depths of the earth have in common with the human womb?

Both contexts have characteristics of mystery, hiddenness, and insulation away from many dangers. They also sequester their inhabitants in remote locales where only God’s access goes. Underground and in utero host prominent energies and activities that generate and sustain life itself.

9. What other Scriptures further testify to the sacredness of human conception and gestation? What additional Scriptures affirm to whom the human body belongs, both our neighbor’s and our own, no matter what age, appearance, or ability?

Genesis 30:1-2, 22 The Lord Himself alone closes and opens wombs (determines fertility).

Exodus 13:12-13 Every Old Testament firstborn belongs to the Lord.

Exodus 21:22-25 Unborn life matters as much as infant life and adult life.

Job 10:10-11 Almighty Maker meticulously manages human development like a craftsman.

Psalms 17:14b Even the youngest of children in the womb equate with treasure.

Psalms 22:10 The Heavenly Father lays claim to each human life from the beginning.

Psalms 127:3 Every child comes as a divine gift and heavenly privilege.

Luke 1:39-45 God's entry among us as an embryo sanctifies pregnancy.
John 3:3-5 Conception and gestation embody the paradigm of God's saving grace.
John 16:21-22 Labor and delivery capture the love of God for humankind.
Genesis 4:9-10 Heaven holds us accountable for our neighbor's welfare.
Genesis 9:5-6 Almighty God requires a reckoning from us for every neighbor's life lost.
Ezekiel 3:18 We have responsibility to warn our neighbors about what endangers them.
Isaiah 58:6-7 We are to treat the neighbor in need as our own flesh and blood.
Matthew 25:34-40 Jesus numbers Himself among the desperate and destitute.
1 Corinthians 6:19-20 The body remains God's property and lodging.
1 Corinthians 12:21-27 Christians connect to each other as members of a single individual.
James 2:14-17 Our faith obliges us to feed and clothe our fellow believers' bodies.

10. Which words of this psalm articulate the forgiveness our Savior's crucifixion has enacted? Which words convey the hope our Lord's resurrection has inaugurated? And why might these promises prove particularly appropriate to each of the life issues identified above?

After admissions that "you discern my thoughts" and "are acquainted with all my ways," assurances that "your right hand shall hold me" and "darkness is as light with you" indicate an atonement carried out by the One who occupies the womb with us. And affirmations that "even the darkness is not dark to you," "I awake, and am still with you," and "[you] lead me in the way everlasting" assert that despair and death itself cannot prevail because of this reality. The Gospel of Christ crucified and alive again grounds our courage to endure life issue difficulties and sufferings without clutching at control by surrendering to death.

11. What do you make of the hate speech (Psalm 139:21-22)? What does it mean to hate? Does the definition take different senses in certain contexts? Does God hate? If so, what and why? What characteristics might differentiate divine understanding from our own? Can hate coexist with the sanctity of human life? If not, why not, and if so, how?

The Scriptures do denounce any hatefulness that despises or abuses anyone else's body and life. So Leviticus 19:17 warns, "You shall not hate your brother in your heart;" Proverbs 26:24 admonishes, "Whoever

hates disguises deceit in his heart;" Matthew 5:43-45 insists, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you;" and 1 John 2:9 concludes, "Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer." But the Word of the Lord also reveals that God Himself "hates the wicked" (Psalm 11:5), "there are six things that the Lord hates" (Proverbs 6:16-19), and "I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated" (Malachi 1:2-3).

Of course, the standards for human disposition and conduct do not bind Him. (His wisdom and ways exceed mortal capability and comprehension, Isaiah 55:8-9 and 1 Corinthians 1:25.) But hate in biblical usage can mean to avoid, reject, and condemn, or to deal with according to retribution rather than tenderness, or even to demote from primary importance. Thus, there is "a time to love, a time to hate" (Ecclesiastes 3:8), and "If anyone ... does not hate his own father and mother ... and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26). Love actually compels us, as it does our Heavenly Father, utterly to disown and discourage any association with things that infringe upon a neighbor's welfare along with anyone who permits, promotes, or participates in them.

12. The title, "To the Choirmaster," appears to indicate an intended public setting. What other dimensions of this psalm suggest it addresses matters of corporate concern, common good, and shared life? What do you think its personal/relational aspects and celebratory tones imply? How might these considerations inform and influence our sanctity of life witness?

These verses recognize God's presence, knowledge, power, and righteousness as having universal application. He beholds me and everyone else, He knows everything about me and all others, He exercises authority over my body and life as well as each human being, He desires and demands and delivers goodness to and for and from me just as much as the entire human race. In 139:19-22, the concerns extend openly beyond one's own doings to those also of others. But this means individual involvement as well, since the Psalmist appreciates that God's grace invites personal conviction and response, especially with regard to injustices occurring around him. So the sanctity of life does not relate simply either to public opinion or personal choice. Each of us and all of us, as both Christians and citizens, get to take up the responsibility and privilege of engaging – in civic activity, in courageous advocacy, and in compassionate intervention and assistance.

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