

PSALM 139

THE INFINITE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

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INTRODUCTION: This psalm of David exalts the infinite attributes of God. It is structurally organized around His attributes of omniscience (vv1-6), omnipresence (vv7-12), and omnipotence (vv13-18) as major themes, but God's attributes of justice, righteousness, mercy, love, goodness, and incomprehensibility are also evident.

The psalmist's repeated use of the personal name Jehovah (i.e., YHWH), also implicitly points to that attribute of God that may be most fundamental or pre-eminent, as the LORD used it to define Himself (Ex3:14-15), and the Lord Jesus referred to it as an attribute of both the Father and the Son (Jn5:26). This attribute is aseity, meaning essentially 'self-existence/self-sufficiency', or as the LORD expressed to Moses, "I AM THAT I AM". The name YHWH is a contraction of the three tenses of the Hebrew verb 'to be', which is a linguistic attempt to express independence and self-existence; this idea shows up in other ways, as when the Lord Jesus identified Himself as, "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, saith the Lord, Who is, and Who was, and Who is to come" (Rev1:8). The aseity of God is a critical attribute to understand, and when thought through carefully can be shown to necessitate plurality within the Godhead.

It is a shame that a great misunderstanding overtakes many Christians (and all non-Christians) regarding the attributes of God. The error is that many attempt to understand the attributes of God as being standards of conduct independent of God, standards against which God Himself can be evaluated. To think of "goodness" or "love" or "holiness" or "justice" or any other attribute of God as characteristics that He just 'happens' to possess is not correct. God IS "love" (1Jn4:8), "good" (Mk10:18), "holy" (1Pet1:16), "righteous" (Isa45:19), etc. God defines these very attributes, and it is impossible to talk about them without talking about God. Thus, it is never correct to look at something that God does and ask the question, "Is it good, loving, just, or right?" If God does it, it is by definition all of these things! Finally, each of God's attributes informs, and is informed by (and in harmony with), all of His other attributes (e.g., God's attribute of love is informed by His attribute of justice, so that God can judge His creature whom He loves; this is the answer the age-old question of scoffers, "How can a loving God send people to Hell?").

Study of the attributes of God has been sorely neglected in our times. Even today, the great theological treatments of the nature and attributes of God are those written especially by the Puritans of 300-400 years ago. This is a shame, as this is a very practical topic for serious contemplation by the believer. What can be more practical than knowing Who our God is and what He is like? Furthermore, knowing what God is like helps us to know ourselves better, as we have been created in His "image" and "likeness" (Gen1:26-27); this means that man shares, albeit to a finite and limited degree, nevertheless in a very real way, all the attributes of his God.

OMNISCIENCE OF GOD

- [1] This verse begins the portion of the psalm that highlights the omniscience of God.
- “O Jehovah, Thou hast searched me, and known *me*”. Note that “me”, being italicized, is not in the Hebrew text. The force of this assertion is more than that Jehovah knows the psalmist, but that He knows all, or everything.
- [2] It is true, however, that the LORD knows the personal details of the psalmist’s life. The phrase “my downsitting and mine uprising” is a merism, denoting the entirety of the psalmist’s life. More than just the physical, the LORD knows even the thoughts of man; “afar off” is actually a temporal, rather than geographical, reference.
- [3] Another merism is used (i.e., path vs. lying down) expressing a comprehensive knowledge of the psalmist’s life.
- [4] Elaborating on the last thought of v2, the LORD knows the psalmists thoughts before he thinks or voices them.
- [5] The entirety of the psalmist’s life is in the hand of the LORD (Cp. Jn10:28-29).
- [6] This verses touches on another attribute of God, His incomprehensibility, as well as the Creator-creature distinction (Cp. Isa55:8-9; Rom11:33). The thought that every detail of the psalmist’s life was understood by and in the hand of the LORD was exceedingly “wonderful” for him.

OMNIPRESENCE OF GOD

- [7] This verse begins the portion of the psalm that highlights the omnipresence of God.
- The psalmist expresses this attribute with the idea that there is nowhere he can go to escape the presence of the LORD (Cp. Amos9:1-3).
- [8] This includes both heaven and hell, which is true literally (Cp. Rev14:9-10) as well as being a merism denoting the entirety of the universe.
- [9] Even if the psalmist were to attempt to flee on “the wings of the morning” (i.e., at the speed of light) he could not escape the presence of the LORD. An attempt to flee to “the uttermost parts of the sea” brings to mind Jonah’s attempt to flee from the presence of the LORD (Jon1:3).
- [10] But rather than being an oppressive thought to the believer, it is one of great comfort. No matter where the believer finds himself, the LORD is there to “lead” and “hold” him.

- [11] No pit of darkness nor depth of despair can remove us from the presence of the LORD.
- [12] For the LORD, there is no difference between the night and the day, darkness and light; things that would be physical barriers for us are irrelevant to God (i.e., Creator-creature distinction).

The Christian today ought to have the same comfort as David in knowing that the Lord has promised us that "I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee" (Heb13:5) and that "I am with you always, even unto the end of the age" (Matt28:20).

OMNIPOTENCE OF GOD

- [13] This verse begins the portion of the psalm that highlights the omnipotence of God. The fact that this portion of the psalm begins with "for" indicates that this portion of the psalm is the 'explanation' for the preceding ones; obviously, the all-powerful Creator knows everything about His creature and can be with him wherever he goes.

The omnipotence of God is set in the context of His creative power. The LORD create the heavens and the earth (i.e., the entire universe) out of nothing by His Word (Ps33:6-9). However, His creative work and care includes even the baby in his mother's womb.

- [14] The psalmist praises (i.e., gives thanks to) the LORD for his own creation. "God... hath made us, and not we ourselves" (Ps100:3). And it is not only God's initial work of creation, but His continuing work of providence that sustains us. The psalmist acknowledges this, and in fact God says that this is a truth that all men know (Rom118-20).
- [15] Here, "the lowest parts of the earth" is apparently a figure for the womb.
- [16] These verses speak directly to the issue of life in the womb. Even before conception, God knows His creature to come (Acts15:18) and has ordained his part in the divine plan (Isa46:10); the perfect illustration of this is John the Baptist (Lk1:15).
- [17] The sum of these thoughts are "precious" to the psalmist, and should be to us as well.
- [18] These truths are without number; we can meditate upon them "day and night" and never exhaust them (Ps1:2). As long as he is awake, the psalmist can be in fellowship with the LORD.

THE PSALMIST PETITIONS HIS OMNISCIENT, OMNIPRESENT, OMNIPOTENT GOD

- [19] The psalm concludes with a decidedly imprecatory section in which David petitions Jehovah, Who he has exalted as the all-knowing, everywhere present, and all-powerful One, to deliver him from his enemies; remember, the LORD has promised to curse the enemies of

Israel (Gen12:3). God will "surely... slay the wicked", because He is just.

[20] Those who speak against the LORD, and take His name in vain, are as abundant today as they were in the days of David.

[21] Here, to "hate" the enemies of God is obviously hyperbole (Cp., Mall:3; Luk14:26), set in contrast with the believer's love for God.

[22] Do we count as our enemies the enemies of God? We are certainly to pray for them (Matt5:44), but we must never be found offering them aid or quarter (2Jn10), either wittingly or unwittingly.

[23] The psalmist realizes he has used strong language regarding his attitude toward God's enemies and his, and as a result prays to be kept from crossing that fine border that separates righteous indignation from sin.

[24] To be led by the LORD "in the way everlasting" ought to be the prayer of every believer (Ps5:8; 23:3).