

# PSALM 139



GOD, MY EXCEEDING JOY  
A JOYFUL JOURNEY THRU THE PSALMS

SEARCH ME & KNOW ME February 4, 2024

## I. IMPACT

### A. Much Loved, Often Quoted.

1. Ps 139 often ranks high as a favorite psalm.
2. The great medieval Jewish scholar, Ibn Ezra, referred it as “the crown of the Psalms.”
3. That said, it is likely true that vv. 19-22 are among the least quoted and least understood portions!

### B. **Applied** Doctrine of God

1. Ps 139 is often referenced in systematic theology for its comments on the divine attributes of God’s omniscience, omnipresence, and omnificence.
2. But the ps is more about applied theology than anything else. David’s stresses how God knows everything about ME and is present with ME no matter where I go. The ps contains around 30 references to God (LORD, God, You, Your) and 50 references to David (I, me, my).
3. William Brown says this poem is, “a celebration of God’s invasion of our privacy.”

## II. GENRE: A Song of Trust with Lament

### A. It is not easy to categorize Ps 139 since it contains elements found in many kinds of psalms.

1. Many call it a song of praise.

2. Some call it a song of thanks (14).
3. Others call it a lament because of the strong closing section (19-24).
4. The song is more of a **mixed** genre psalm. It is mostly a song of trust ending with a lament. The hard final section may reveal the backdrop to the song.

## III. SETTING

### A. AUTHOR & BACKGROUND

1. David (c. 1040-970 BC).
2. While there is no historical note in the headings, there are some background hints in the **lament** section (19-24).
  - a. David speaks of enemies using God’s name in vain (20b). This likely refers to using His name to make false oaths. Ex. 20:7; **Lev 19:12**.
  - b. David’s enemies may have falsely sworn about David’s alleged sins. Perhaps they claimed he joined them in evil acts of violence (19b-20).
    - (1) Ultimately, the enemies oppose God. They oppose David because he is God’s man.
    - (2) David **disavows** any association with their violent evil (19b, 21-22).
    - (3) Throughout the ps David is comforted that God knows exactly what he has done & said. **Cf. 17:3; 26:1-3**.
  - c. We can’t be absolutely certain this is the background, but this view goes a long way in explaining the strong lament and imprecations.

### B. PLACEMENT

1. Pss 138-145 are the last Davidic songs in the Psalter.
2. Pss 138 & 139 share some expressions in common.
  - a. God’s awareness: 138:6 and 139:2
  - b. God’s right hand: 138:7 and 139:10
  - c. Unholy enemies: 138:7 and 139:19-22.

## III. COMMENTS & OBSERVATIONS

- A. **Beautiful Symmetry.** Ps 139 is one of the most symmetrical of the psalms, consisting of 4 movements of 6 verses each. The first 3 movements follow basically the same structure (see Visual Outline Chart).
- B. **Sophisticated Poetry.** The style employed by David is among his most refined. He uses several very rare words and paints striking visual pictures.
- C. **Eruptions of Praise.** Three outbursts of praise punctuate the psalm (6, 14, 17-18).
- D. **Divine Attributes.** Three divine characteristics are celebrated in the first three movements.
  1. **Omniscience:** God’s knowledge of all.
  2. **Omnipresence:** God’s universal presence.
  3. **Omnificence:** God’s unlimited creative power.
  4. These attributes are not discussed abstractly but with reference to David personally.
- E. **Important Imprecations.** Many critics complain that the prayers of vv. 19-22 ruin the song. But this fails to appreciate how these verses inform the background.

**F. Key Concepts.**

1. God’s Searchings (1, 23)
2. God’s Knowledge
3. God’s Wonders
  - a. His ability to know everything about me (6)
  - b. His ability to make me as I am (14)
4. God’s Thoughtful Care

**G. Vivid Pictures.**

1. **Omni-dimensional (8):** Whether up in heaven or down in Sheol, God is present.
2. **Omnidirectional (9):** In the far East and West, God is present.
  - a. The “wings of the **dawn**” refers to sun rays from the eastern horizon. (Mal 4:2)
  - b. The “remotest part of the sea” refers to the western horizon over the Mediterranean.
3. **Oppressive Darkness (11-12).** David speaks of darkness as situational danger that can “overwhelm” (lit. **bruise**) him. But God is not blinded or bound by it.
4. **The Depth of the Earth (15).** David speaks of his prenatal development as taking place here, an idiom for things that hidden & unseen. (Cf. Adam’s being made from the dust of the ground.)
5. **Limitless Love (17-18):** God’s caring thoughts about us are more than can be imagined—more than all the grains of sand.

**H. A Ringleader:** The term “wicked” in v. 19 is **singular**, suggesting there was a ringleader to the “men of bloodshed.”

**I. Holy Disassociation:** David’s hatred of God’s enemies is more about disassociating from them than anything else. He does not endorse them or associate with them and disavows any connection with them.

**J. Submission to the Inspector:** After praying strong prayers of judgment (19-22), David submits himself to divine inspection (23-24). In the end what matters most is God’s evaluation of Him, not man’s.

**K. Anxiety Attacked:** David’s prayer for divine inspection is one way he battles the anxious thoughts his problems brought. He desires God to comb through his thinking as well as to vindicate his name.

<b>PSALM 139</b> © M. Scott Bashoor 2024		<b>PURPOSE:</b> Confident in his relationship with the all-knowing God, David takes comfort in praying to Yahweh who knows the truth about him, giving him boldness to face severe, false accusations about his participation in wicked violence.			<b>Type:</b> Mixed Psalm of Trust with Lament <b>Author:</b> David (c. 1040-970 BC) <b>Date:</b> Unknown <b>Setting:</b> Perhaps after facing stinging, false accusations (v. 20b) <b>Note:</b> Part of the final collection of Davidic songs (Pss 138-145)
<b>HEADINGS</b> v. 0	<b>CONFESSION OF TRUST:</b> DELIGHT IN YAHWEH’S PERSONAL KNOWLEDGE vv. 1-18			<b>LAMENT:</b> PRAYER FOR GOD’S INTERVENTION AGAINST FALSE WITNESSES vv. 19-24	
Authorization Consigned to the Sanctuary Choir Director	Yahweh’s Penetrating Knowledge vv. 1-6	Yahweh’s Personal Presence vv. 7-12	Yahweh’s Kind Omnificence vv. 13-18	Imprecation against the Wicked vv. 19-22	
Song Type A “Psalm” (intended for instrumental accompaniment)	Affirmation of Yahweh’s Personal Inspection v. 1	Affirmation of Yahweh’s Universal Presence v. 7	Affirmation of Yahweh’s Intimately Creative Work v. 13	Prayer for Judgment on the Ringleader v. 19a	
Authorship David	Meditation on Yahweh’s Personal Inspection vv. 2-4	Meditation on Yahweh’s Presence vv. 8-10	Pledge of Thanks for Yahweh’s Personal Creation v. 14	Disavowal of Violent Sinners v. 19b	
	Knowledge of All Activities vv. 2-3	Present Above & Below v. 8	Meditation on Yahweh’s Personal Creation vv. 15-16	Reasons for the Imprecation v. 20	
	Knowledge of All Words v. 4	Present from East to West vv. 9-10	In His Prenatal Development v. 15	<i>Speaking Against God</i> v. 20a	
	Celebration of Yahweh’s Knowledge vv. 5-6	Celebration of Yahweh’s Presence vv. 11-12	In the Ordaining of His Lifespan v. 16	<i>Making False Oaths (of Accusation)</i> v. 20b	
	Intimate & Supportive Knowledge v. 5	David’s Concern Regarding the Darkness v. 11	Celebration of Yahweh’s Personal Creation vv. 17-18	Disavowal of Violent Sinners vv. 21-22	
	Miraculous & Divine v. 6	Yahweh’s Full Awareness of the Darkness v. 12	God’s Care Valued Greatly v. 17	Submission to Divine Inspection vv. 23-24	
			God’s Care Infinitely Great v. 18	To Bring Relief from Accusation v. 23	
				To Remove Any Grievous Way v. 24	