

A God We Can Follow

Today we look at a psalm attributed to King David, which is acknowledged as a masterpiece of biblical poetry.

I'll read **Psalm 139:1-6; 13-18.**

O LORD, you have searched me and known me.

² *You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.*

³ *You search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.*

⁴ *Even before a word is on my tongue,
O LORD, you know it completely.*

⁵ *You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.*

⁶ *Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.*

*For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.*

¹⁴ *I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;*

that I know very well.

¹⁵ *My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.*

¹⁶ *Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.*

*In your book were written
all the days that were formed for me,
when none of them as yet existed.*

¹⁷ *How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!*

¹⁸ *I try to count them—they are more than the sand;
I come to the end—I am still with you.*

In this psalm, David's prays to God with an awareness of his perfect wisdom and powerful presence and concludes thereby that God is a God we can follow in a relationship of total trust.

Trust is sometimes hard to come by. In our daily life we have problems knowing whom to believe and whom to follow. Because of a history of broken promises, many have become cynical about politicians, who ask us to follow their leadership in government. People remember broken promises and failed leadership and thus are reluctant to follow those who seek to be leaders in government or in business.

Sadly, even in church life, because of the moral failure and hypocrisy of pastors, priests and other ministers, many are reluctant to follow their religious leaders, if indeed they have remained in their churches. Paul the apostle called for the people, some who had been prejudiced against his leadership, to follow him with a *conditional* follower-ship:

“Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1).

We can follow leaders who themselves are accountable to a higher authority and example. After expressing his troubled thoughts as well as thoughts of praise for God's greatness, David gives a prayer of surrender to God, saying that, after his reflection in his prayer and meditation, he's now ready to surrender to God's leadership “in the way everlasting” (verse 24). But before he comes to that commitment, he struggles as he contemplates the attributes of God that lead him to this conclusion.

In the opening stanza of this psalm (verses 1-6), David says that we can follow a God who knows all about us. He knows everything! David is first moved to think of God's omniscience, that he knows everything that happens in his creation, and God knows what has happened, what is happening and what is yet to take place.

God knows our thoughts and speech even before we think and open our mouths (verses 2b & 4). David doesn't simply praise God for his omniscience; he also expresses his discomfort with the thought that he also judges us: “You hem me in,” David says. David realizes that he is never out of God's sight, which is not always a comfortable thought. There are times when I wish God were not omniscient, when he didn't know my thoughts or my words. Frankly, at times I wish he would simply leave me alone and just be available when I need him and aware of me only when I'm on my best behavior. But the fact remains, God is always fully aware of all my thoughts, words and actions.

He, the perfectly righteous God is also the perfect judge. He sees beyond and behind all our actions, which we think will impress him and hide our hypocrisy from him, such as religious routine and observances. But Jesus, the eternal Son of God, sees beyond our rituals and when we are giving him just superficial lip service (Matthew 15:1ff; Isaiah 29:13). In his incarnation, the eternal Son laid aside his glory but not his full deity. Nathanael was amazed by Jesus' knowledge of what he was doing and where he was sitting even before Jesus met him (John 1:47ff).

David says that this all-knowing God, even though he is the perfect Judge, has laid his hand upon him (verse 5b). Peterson's *The Message* paraphrases this to say that God's hand upon David is indicative of his “reassuring presence, coming and going.”

The good news is that, although God knows us completely and judges us perfectly, he also sympathizes compassionately with us. The Book of Hebrews reminds us that Jesus, the Son of God, is also our sympathetic great high priest (4:14-5:10). He who lived among us as one of us, knows all about our weaknesses and vulnerability. And as the great high priest he made the perfect sacrifice that satisfies the justice of a holy God who knows all about us. We can follow a God who knows all about us, loves us, gave his all for us, and who is always with us (verses 7-12).

In the second stanza of the psalm, David says that *God is omnipresent*: He's everywhere! This is an amazing thought. The entire the creation, which defies all measurements, is filled with the presence of the creator/sustainer God. This is not pantheism. God is not the same as his creation but rather is beyond it and separate in essence, though not in presence, from it. We know that God is spirit, as Jesus says (John 4:24) and thus can be omnipresent, everywhere at the same time, except where he chooses to absent himself.

David seems to express a desire to flee from God, and there are times when we are uncomfortable at the thought of his presence. David was perhaps referring to the way he doubtless sought to flee into the darkness of secrecy, hiding from the presence of God after his egregious sin with Bathsheba and against her husband, Uriah (2 Samuel 11). Regardless of how we try to hide our sins or regardless of the spiritual darkness into which our souls may plunge, God is nevertheless present (verses 11f).

You've perhaps heard the story of Francis Thompson (1859-1907), whose most famous poem is *The Hound of Heaven*, is an autobiographical description of how Christ pursued him like a hound until he graciously rescued him. When young Thompson failed in his efforts to become a priest, and then failed in an attempt to become a medical doctor, in an effort to please his parents; he then became a homeless drug addict, sleeping under a London bridge. In desperation he introduced himself and his literary work to a magazine editor and his wife, who recognized young Thompson's talent and took pity on this desperately sick and addicted young man. The Meynells admitted young Thompson into a monastery, where he could recover from his opium addiction and also write poetry. There, in 1889, at the age of 30, Thompson wrote *The Hound of Heaven*, with some of the following lines:

*I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
 Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.*

Francis Thompson was running from the loving God, who pursued him even against his will and then transformed his will and gave him hope. Our situation

may not be as desperate as was young Thompson's, but nevertheless we may be emotionally and spiritually, if not physically running from God. But God is right here and we cannot run away from him.

In the early 90's, soon after the Gulf War in Iraq, US Commanding General Norman Swartzkopf was interviewed on a late night television program and described the behavior of his dog after it had badly misbehaved. The general said his dog, knowing he was guilty of disobedience and was facing discipline from his master, would cover his eyes with his paws. The dog thought that by blinding himself he was making himself disappear or become invisible to his master. And that's the same foolishness David describes in this psalm. We think that by plunging ourselves into spiritual darkness or going into some kind of "respectable hiding" here in Madison, we're making ourselves invisible to God, that he really won't notice our temporary disappearance. Just because we can no longer see God doesn't mean he can no longer see us. God will not countenance our self-ordered leave of absence from him. We are never on vacation from God and he is always seeking our worship and fellowship, and he expects, even demands, our faithfulness to him and our service in his kingdom.

But wherever we try to go, God is there and, as David says he *will never leave us*. There seems to be a shift in mood, just as in the first stanza, from being uncomfortable with God's omniscience and omnipresence, to one of grateful surrender. At first David wants to hide and run from God. But then his attitude becomes one of gratitude for God's knowing, when he lays his hand of blessing on David (verse 5b) and gratitude that God is present to guide him and hold him fast (verse 10). As you read the story of David, you see that he was always in need of God's protection and deliverance from his enemies, whether the Philistines, King Saul, or even the enemies from his own household. He found great strength and encouragement in the awareness of God's presence.

For those who know and love God, this is a great comfort. God is always with us, alongside us and, through the Holy Spirit, dwelling inside us. Regardless of how distant he may seem from us, we have the assurance that the risen Christ will never leave or forsake us and is with us always (Matthew 28:20). This is the will of the Triune God, that we might be with him forever (John 17:24).

And David says that this God we can follow is still working on us (verses 13-24). Beginning with the 13th verse, David turns his thoughts toward God's creation of him, and notes that God's greatness can be seen also in his creation of a human being, the crown of all his creation.

Scientist/evangelist Louie Giglio presents a powerful portrayal of the wonderful complexity of the human body, with its some 75 trillion cells and that replace themselves with remarkable rapidity. He also remarks that the human eye is "the most technically advanced piece of equipment on the planet." Giglio speaks about the remarkable laminin protein in the human body that literally holds the

human body together, and shows how this protein is in the shape of a cross. This may well be God's imprint to remind us of what Paul says, that Christ is the image of the invisible God, by whom all things were created and in him all things hold together (Colossians 1:15ff). Christ is the great creator of a vast, unknowable universe and also of intricate, fearfully made human beings. And he didn't just create us—he also holds us together and cares deeply about each one of us (See Louie Giglio on DVD, *How Great Is Our God*, available through www.268generation.com).

David acknowledges that his body was created by God and the days of his life were foreknown by this Creator, who shaped him into his own image, as God's Eikons (Gr. "images")..

Several years ago on a visit to Florence, Nancy and I stood in awe before the great masterpiece of Michelangelo, his most famous sculpture, *David*. Our artist and art professor daughter, Stephanie, helped us to appreciate the brilliance of this masterpiece with her comments about its amazing proportions and attention to detail. I was particularly interested in learning that Michelangelo created this masterpiece from a huge block of marble that had been abandoned in the late fifteenth century by the Florentine sculptor, Agostino d'Antonio, who gave up on working with this piece of marble as being hopeless because of a fatal flaw in the marble. When the young Michelangelo found this block of marble, it was not only flawed but by now badly disfigured from d'Antonio's truncated efforts. But as Joanna and Alister McGrath's noted in their book, *The Dilemma of Self-Esteem*, Michelangelo "saw beyond the ugly disfigured block of marble to the magnificent sculpture he knew he could create. As a result, he began his work. The final statue—the celebrated *David*—is widely regarded as one of the most outstanding artistic achievements of all time" (page 94).

With all of his flaws and sins, David experienced the redeeming, image-restoring work of God's Spirit. His prayer for God to search, know and test him, reveal his sinful, harmful ways to him and then lead him in the way everlasting is a prayer for this work of redemption (verses 23f). God sees us in the same way—not as we are in our sin, rebellion, iniquity and failure—but as we will become by his grace and Spirit. He looks beyond all of our flaws and the cracks in the Eikon, the image of God, and sees us as righteous as Christ is righteous. He also begins at work on us immediately to begin shaping us into his masterpieces, his image bearers, far more precious in his sight than any human-made masterpiece.

In the closing verses of this great psalm, David has come to a point of fresh surrender to following the Lord God in "the way everlasting," the way of eternal life that is a pilgrimage to the everlasting new heaven and earth, the city of God. We can trust that God will lead us to the fulfillment of this great and solid hope, which is not wishful thinking but strong, well-founded conviction. Our God is a God we can follow and one we can trust all of the way into eternity.

