

Psalm 139---The Attributes of God

I read a book years ago that I believe was entitled HOW BIG IS YOUR GOD. The author's point was that most people's view of God is really small. The three leading views of God are: Santa Claus, a Genie in a bottle, or a kindly old grandfather. I have had several people add to that, saying God is "their best friend" or their good buddy. Voltaire, the French philosopher, said, "God created man in His own image, and now man has returned the favor". I think he meant that it is convenient that we paint God as very much like ourselves so that we can justify our lives. Santa Claus exists to bring us presents, to give us three wishes, and like granddaddy, to spoil us rotten. The overriding principle of all this is that God exists to serve us instead of Him creating us to serve Him. Obviously, the Bible teaches just the opposite.

A.W. Tozer said, "A right concept of God is basic not only to systematic theology but to practical Christian living as well. It is to worship what the foundation is to the temple. Where it is inadequate or out of plumb, the whole structure must sooner or later collapse." We must KNOW the one true God before we can serve Him and worship Him properly. Jesus equated salvation and eternal life to knowing God in His high priestly prayer of John 17:3, "And this is eternal life, that they know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou has sent." Paul said that his primary pursuit in his spiritual life was that He might know Jesus in Philippians 3:10, "that I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings".

If you are thinking "Don't I know God?", let me remind you that the biblical concept of knowing is very much like believing. Knowing God implies that you are changed by that knowledge. If you "know God and Jesus Christ whom God has sent" then you have been transformed. If we know and believe in the one true God presented in our Bible, our lives will continue to change as Paul said in 2 Cor.4:16, "our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day." One difficulty in this renewing is that you will only trust someone to the extent that you "know" them. We can't know God unless He reveals Himself to us, and we believe that He has in the Scriptures. My favorite passage on the attributes of God is Psalm 139. Here we will see the omniscience, the omnipresence, and the omnipotence of God.

A Warning and a Comfort

Psalm 139 was written by David very likely during a time in which his opponents were very actively accusing him of various sins. Although David committed his share of sin during his life, at the time of his writing this psalm he was living a straight life. He will establish his innocence by reminding his audience of the omniscience of God, and praying that God who knows everything about him will search him in and out and convict him of any sin. The knowledge that God is omniscient comes across as both a great comfort to the innocent, but a terrible warning to the guilty. Please read Psalm 139 with me.

Notice that David is saying in verse 1 that God has searched and known “me”. We have a personal God who knows and cares about us. He knows everything we do and everywhere we go. In verse 2, God even knows what we are thinking at all times. Just imagine all the thoughts of all the people of all the world for all time---now that’s omniscience. It is even more amazing that He cares. God’s knowledge is infallible and to us it seems incomprehensible. This all knowing of God of all our actions and all our thoughts is both a comfort to believers, but a warning to unbelievers. It is comforting that God is always with us as believers to convict us of our sin, or like David, if we are innocent He will ultimately vindicate us. Also, I can’t help but notice the two extremes of the observed and the Observer. We are wandering about aimlessly never knowing what other people are doing, much less thinking. If I had a penny for every time I’ve been tricked, hoodwinked, bamboozled, and played for a sap, I could build the great pyramids out of pennies. We are so clueless we don’t even understand ourselves. The great Searcher of hearts knows what we are going to say even before we say it, while we utter those famous words of Ralph Kramden (The Honeymooners), “I got a big mouth!”.

The application of this is we should be so filled with the awe of God that we become more aware of sin, more aware of what we say and do, how we treat each other, because God knows and God is watching. The constant presence of God with us observing both our failures and our successes should have a very sobering effect on how we think and act. Meanwhile, the rest of the world seems to be oblivious to God’s presence as they master the art of living two lives---the public life that projects the image they want the world to perceive, and the secret life of insecurities, lusts, jealousies, and hostility. If you are aware of God’s omniscience then you know that your thoughts, intentions, and actions are transparent to Him. You can fool the people around you, but to the Lord you are transparent. I love David’s conclusion to this first section in verse 6. God’s knowledge surpasses my comprehension. It is too lofty for my puny mind, yet most people’s way of dealing with it is to reduce their idea of God so they can understand Him, control Him, and manipulate Him.

Nowhere to Hide

Since God is all knowing, my only recourse is to stay away from Him, hide, do my stuff behind closed doors, in secret or in the dark where nobody can see. In v.7-12, David reveals that is not an option because God is everywhere, He is omnipresent. No one can escape the observation of the omnipresent Spirit of God. There is no hiding from God. Whether you go to the highest mountain or the lowest valley, God is there. God observes everything whether it be done in the daylight or the darkness of night. We can hide from each other, but not from God. Throughout history even prophets and kings of Israel have tried to run away from God, only to find His convicting presence was always with them. No doubt when David sinned with Bathsheba and killed Uriah, he tried as hard as he could to cover it up. He swore everyone who knew to secrecy, and then acted as if everything was normal. Yet for about a year God’s Spirit convicted him. We know from Ps. 32:3-4 that God’s hand was “heavy upon David”. David was torn up physically and emotionally during the cover-up. Who can forget the prophet Jonah who was commanded by God to go to Nineveh, but because Jonah hated the Assyrians, he went the opposite

direction trying to escape the presence of God. Most people think that story is all about a whale, but out of four chapters in the book of Jonah, only two short verses are about the whale. Most people are so distracted by the whale they miss the themes of the rebellion of man, the sovereignty of God, and God's redemptive plan. The big fish was just God's agent of depositing the prophet back on the straight path of obedience.

The lesson for us is to fully realize that we are getting away with nothing. Wherever you go, God is there. Whatever you think or say, God hears. Whatever you do, even behind closed doors, God sees it. The good news is if we are living in an abiding obedient relationship with the Lord, he is guiding and helping us wherever we are. Here is where you think I'm going to give the bad news, but the fact is even if we are off track like David or Jonah was, God's presence is still good news for us who believe. God is actively working to bring us to repentance just like He did with David and Jonah, and of course that is the best thing that can happen.

Fearfully and Wonderfully Made

In Ps.139:13-16, David establishes God's omnipotence by reviewing how awesome His creation is. It required an all powerful God to create from scratch something as complex and wonderful as the human anatomy. When you consider that to do even the simplest of tasks requires billions of brain cells to communicate in coordination in an instant, it blows your mind. Years ago I broke a finger so I went to a hand specialist. He showed me a model of just the human hand. I never realized how complex and awesome a machine just a hand is. David wrote that God formed all of our parts. He used the imagery of "weaving" him in his mother's womb. Man is truly wonderfully and fearfully made. Only the omnipotent God could make us and fashion a world that we could thrive in.

I think David was using his own body as an evidence of God's omnipotence to point out that the all powerful God made me just as I am for a purpose. This is sobering because all of us from time to time are unhappy with some defect that we perceive in ourselves is holding us back from our desires. In fact, God made us just as we are for a purpose. God has a plan for each of us, and He is with us helping us carry it out. Like David and Jonah, we often "grieve the Spirit" or "quench the Spirit", but God is always there and He knows what we need, and He is able to help us with it. Even the days of my life are numbered and fixed as David wrote in v.16, "The days that were ordained for me, when as yet there was not one of them."

Applications

Knowing God involves living like we are aware of His attributes. He loves us and wants the best for us, but it is also true that God requires holiness and justice. We are always in the presence of God no matter where we go, and God knows all things--even our thoughts and intentions. Shouldn't this be a powerful hindrance to practicing sin? David's prayer in the final verse says this well, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my anxious thoughts...and lead me in the eternal way."

CHARLIE TAYLOR