

Learning from the Psalms: Searched, Lost and Found

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Psalm 139 1-12; 23-24

Pastor Chip Fisher

“O LORD, where can I go to escape from Your Spirit?”

“Where can I flee from Your presence?”

Most of us are probably too cozy with the Almighty, too well-fed on a diet of the gospel of the love of God, to be able to comprehend the bewilderment and anguish and maybe even anger behind these words of the Psalmist. (This is not necessarily a bad thing, by the way.) But are we able to hear these cries as the desperate cry of one being pursued, like a criminal in a detective show sprinting to outrun the police, all the while having been scheming to retire to an offshore, preferably tropical, hideaway far beyond the reach of the law?

To try to escape from the pursuit and the reach of God: to hide from the Holy One? Why would the Psalmist ever want to do such a thing? Surely God is merciful; surely God understands our flaws and foibles. Surely God loves us, and we are all sophisticated enough around here to know that surely God is not the wrathful God, the judgmental God before whom others cower in fear. After all, why would the Psalmist even think about running away from such a comforting, accommodating Deity as we worship?

We'll circle back around to address the character of God. But for now let's simply note that I can have no appreciation for the mercy of God, no awareness of the love of God if I give in to spiritual amnesia and assume that I am fairly lovable, on the whole, and in no particular need of God's mercy or salvation. (I mean I can name a lot of people who are not so lovable, and they obviously need a whole lot of God's mercy...but...oh, yeah...this is the point, isn't it.) If I blithely assume God is “in the forgiveness business” and it therefore makes little difference how I live, I may slip in, eventually, on a technicality—but my life here and now will be a lot more of a struggle than I want. (And I have found that God doesn't have to exercise a lot of divine wrath toward me; judgment happens every day and it often looks a lot like what we call reality. But even Paul—the missionary of the risen Christ and His life-changing love—even Paul observed “For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil.” [2 Cor 5:10])

It's easy for me to drift whenever I start to think “I'm OK, you're OK, God's OK, we're all OK.” It's easiest

for me to drift when I get complacent, forget how deep a hole I can dig myself into, forget how God has already saved me, time and again. I'm not sure whether this hard observation by D. A. Carson also applies to you or not: “People do not [just] drift toward holiness. Apart from grace-driven effort, people do not gravitate toward godliness, prayer, obedience to Scripture, faith, and delight in the Lord. We drift toward compromise and call it tolerance; we drift toward disobedience and call it freedom... We cherish the indiscipline of self-control and call it relaxation; we slouch toward prayerlessness and delude ourselves into thinking we have escaped legalism; we slide toward godlessness and convince ourselves we have been liberated.”

The Psalmist has been searched, scrutinized, in microscopic detail by the all-seeing God: “O LORD, You have searched me and intimately known me.” [v 1] God knows him inside and out. God sees him going out, going in; awake and asleep. God knows his dreams. Your best friend may be able to finish your sentences—God could begin them. This closeness is profoundly uncomfortable to the Psalmist: like the new full-body scan and full-body frisking in the airport.

Like how one night last month I was driving to our hotel, our recent home, late one Saturday night. The police had set up a dragnet to catch drunk drivers on Baker Street. (It's the second one I've driven into in the past year: be careful out there: do not drink and drive!) There are these blindingly bright searchlights—they are irritatingly bright even if all you've been drinking is organic skim milk—and several portable stations over by the curb. You must come to a complete stop. An officer tells you to roll down your window, looks you over, and may shine a flashlight into your face for extra measure. I suppose if your eyes look the least bit bloodshot, or if s/he gets even a whiff of alcohol on your breath, you get swept over to the portable lab for a breathalyzer test. (And by the time you see those lights of the dragnet, it's too late to pull off.)

Fortunately, both times I had been coming from the church. (You see, hanging out at church can pay off in more ways than you thought!) So I was never worried about driving through the checkpoint. But the Psalmist was not so confident about the all-probing, all-seeing, all-knowing, all-judging Eye of God peering into his life.

Perhaps he understood to whom much is given, much is required. What we sow, so shall we reap. That the moral law of reality is unbending—that the law of cause and effect will inexorably have its day against dishonesty and irresponsibility and laxity and laziness, in the lives of individuals and nations and civilizations. That justice will be done. Maybe the Psalmist understood that we will have to answer for those wasted hours and those missed opportunities; for our plugging our eyes and ears against the cries of others in need, for any sense of superiority we may have harbored over the accidental good fortune of the land of our birth or the genes and attributes with which we were born—God’s gifts to us.

The searing searchlights of that dragnet are merely an inconvenience if you haven’t been drinking. I’m sure they’re right scary if you have. The prospect of God knowing you intimately, moment-by-moment, inside and out, was right scary to the Psalmist. He had been searched and laid open to the core.

All that prompted him to want to get lost, to flee far away from the Holy One.

It’s all too human, when we are found guilty or inadequate or shamed, to try to run away to buy a little space, or peace and quiet, or at least some time to plan our next move. This was the first strategy in the Bible, going back to the first cause for guilt and shame: Adam and Eve’s first disobedience in the Garden of Eden. In that story, after they ate the fruit, remember how they tried to hide from God among the trees. Guess what: this strategy of running away from God didn’t work then either.

At least the Psalmist didn’t try to hide in some trees. Where should he go to escape from the searing gaze of the One who knew him so deeply, so personally? If he could fly up to heaven, of course God would be there; if he could go down below into Sheol—a kind of comatose realm of suspended animation for those who had died—then God would be there, too. If he should go to the farthest limits of the sea—presumably the Mediterranean, to the west, or to the “wings of the morning”—a poetic description of the eastern horizon, where the morning began, he would find himself face to face with God. East or west, high or low—just there is God. [I am speculating, but I believe that if we have allowed God to align us with His purposes; if we are willing to live in God’s Kingdom and be transformed by His love and the Spirit of the risen Christ, then His divine presence will seem heavenly to us; if we have spent our life trying to ignore or oppose God, or isolating ourselves against His ways and His love and His Son, then His divine presence of eternal light and

love will feel like hell to us. But He is Lord over both the living and the dead, and He has a long time to work with...and Jesus is very good at His job as Savior.]

The Psalmist found God’s hand heavy upon him [v 5]—as if he were a prisoner bound in shackles with a guard grabbing his shoulder. He also found himself “hemmed in” by God: this is the same word describing a besieging army which “hemmed in” the starving citizens within the walls of the city. (To be slowly strangled and starved within a besieged city was about as bad as it got.)

I have found it’s a lot cheaper and less hassle to try to “get lost” from God, to flee from God, while staying at home. I don’t have to buy a ticket for Madagascar or the Land of the Rising Sun. It’s plenty easy right here. I have found, unfortunately, that I can become a fugitive from God simply by being too busy to spend meaningful time unhurriedly in His presence. By frantically “doing” rather than “being.” I am a fugitive when I remain superficial and distant in my prayers and thoughts, shared with the Holy Spirit—as if God doesn’t know me intimately and personally. I am a fugitive from God by praying for my own concerns alone and working to accomplish them, rather than paying attention to God’s wider concerns and applying my energies to accomplish God’s purposes. I am a fugitive from God when I trust in God too little, and act as if it’s my responsibility to have to protect God from failing or being embarrassed. (Was I ever inspired by hearing this week from Pastor Patrick Okabe, Daniel’s father, about how Jesus’ disciples in Uganda often experience what is humanly impossible as they trust in Him every day because they know without God they may have nothing—not even food for tomorrow or money to buy some—literally. Mark your calendars to hear Pastor Okabe preach here on March 27!) I can remain a fugitive from God by failing to love you in this church. (Jesus was clear in His repeated command: “Love one another as I have loved you all.”) It would be a tedious and too-long list for me to belabor further, but you get the idea...

What are some of the ways you try to “get lost” and flee from God?

The Psalmist knows he has been searched by God. That’s a scary business. He has therefore tried to run away, to “lose” himself from God. But he also rejoices in the confidence that God has found him.

Psalm 139 comes full circle: it began with the fear that the Holy One of Israel had indeed searched him and intimately known him—and it ends with a confident openness before the same Holy One: “Search me, O God, and know my heart;...Lead me in the way everlasting.”

[v 23]

There are several factors which can change fear into confidence; reluctance into willingness before God. For one thing, the Psalmist continued to remain in intensely personal communication with God even when he was afraid. There are 81 personal pronouns in these 24 verses! “I, You; You, me”... “You know when I sit up and when I rise up...You are acquainted with all my ways.” No matter how you may be feeling, keep in close touch with the Holy Spirit. Are you feeling guilty? Talk to God. Are you feeling He has been unfair to You? Talk to Him. Feeling sad or defeated and discouraged? Cry out to Him. Needing to be quiet? Draw near to Him; invite Him into your pain. Feeling too afraid to proceed with the assignment He is laying before you? Spend the time for a Spirit transfusion. Are there things you don’t understand? Ask Him. Wanting Someone to share your blessings with, to celebrate with, to thank? Praise Him. You get the idea.

By God’s grace, the Psalmist recognizes that God is more than the Holy One; more than the all-seeing Eye; more than Big Brother spying over Winston Smith and Julia and everyone else in Orwell’s 1984. Yes, God is holy and God is just—but God is gracious. God knows us intimately and personally but loves us still, whether we feel worth loving or not.

One man who felt unlovable, no stranger to failure and shame, was Bill Wilson, the co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous. He knew that his drinking was ruining his life, and had been trying to quit drinking for years. No go. Wilson had been an agnostic, paying no particular attention to God one way or the other. But one of his friends urged him to seek God’s help. Wilson went into his hotel room after a conversation with this friend. Crying out in desperation, he prayed, “If there is a God, let Him show Himself!” I am ready to do anything. Anything!” According to Wilson’s account, his room was bathed in a white light, somehow conveying the presence of God. In his words, “It seemed to me, in the mind’s eye, that I was on a mountain and that a wind not of air, but of spirit was blowing. And then it burst upon me that I was a free man.” Following that experience he was able, for the first time, to stop drinking. [David Brooks, “Bill Wilson’s Gospel,” NY Times online, June 28, 2010] Tens of millions of people around the world are now thanking their Higher Power that he did.

Another factor to help turn our fear into confidence: God’s grace also empowers us. We heard the Psalmist say God’s hand was laid upon him, as a guard would seize and hold a prisoner. But a few verses later he uses a different word, “Your right hand, [O God,] shall

hold me fast.” [v 10b] In Hebrew thought the left hand symbolized judgment; the right hand symbolizes strength and mercy. You and I, too, are held by God’s right hand; His mercy and power over us and for us will never let us go. Our eternal relation to Him rests not on our ability to hold Him tight—but on the strength of His merciful grip upon our lives and our futures. Whatever your flaws and foibles: you are held by God’s powerful right hand. God will hold you tight. However lovable or courageous or faithful you feel or don’t feel; whether you are living in the light or in the darkness. Once He has found you, God will never let you go.

Sir Alec Guinness experienced the grace of God in the darkness. He, too, had been an agnostic all his life—he believed it was all up to chance and his efforts. No higher power. He was filming a movie, on location, in a little village in France. He had been playing a priest [Father Brown], and one very dark night he was walking down the village lane toward the next village where he was staying. He heard running footsteps and a little boy’s voice crying out, “Mon pere, mon pere!” The 7-year old held his hand tightly, thinking him a real priest, and chatted happily all the way to the next village. Not wanting to disillusion the boy, Guinness did not say a word. He held the boy’s hand until the lad reached his home in the next village.

The actor stopped in the village square to reflect. The boy had trusted his life to the care of this unknown father, Sir Alec Guinness, whom he believed represented God. He was a more confident boy as a result. Surely, Guinness reasoned, there must be a greater Father than he, in whom Guinness could put his trust and live with a more trusting spirit. Guinness describes that beginning to a lifetime of transformation; he lived his life very differently from that night forward. [in Blessings in Disguise, his autobiography.]

Another factor that can change our fear of God into a life of confidence is that unlike the Psalmist, we now have seen the face of God in Jesus the Christ. Jesus does not show us a different God, a loving God. I could be wrong, but I believe there is one God, eternally, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. Not one mean God of the Old Testament and a loving God of the New. Jesus reveals to all the world the unchanging nature and character of the God who is. (“The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen His glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth...No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son [Jesus Christ], who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made Him known.” [John 1:14, 18])

Even when we are lost, when we are fleeing, when we are God’s enemies, Jesus comes to us. His Holy Spirit of

power and love keeps coming after us. The philosopher Voltaire was on his deathbed. A priest asked if he had made his peace with God. "I didn't know we had ever quarreled." So many don't know we had ever quarreled with God. Like Voltaire and millions in our day, we tend to figure we're pretty lovable people in no particular need of God's mercy or salvation. What's the quarrel?

Yet Jesus went to the cross to show the substance of the love of God. The people in that scene were not so different from us. There was a politician afraid of losing his power and prestige and position. The religious types were hanging onto what they were familiar with; they couldn't accept those "unacceptable" whom Jesus accepted. They certainly weren't about to give their lives over to become one of His disciples. There were business people whose business and ethics He had disturbed in overturning the tables. His friends were too cowardly to stand with Him. Many who had known Jesus remained in the background: they didn't want anyone to know they were with Him.

Each of us can be found somewhere in that scene; in Christ we know that the invasive, relentless grace of God has certainly "found" us. God's right hand grasps us; God's grace finds us in order to change us. Our life in Christ is never about a moment or an hour—but about a lifetime of becoming more like our risen Lord, Jesus. We draw more near to the Father. Like Jesus, we hear the cries of those in need rather than stop our ears. We love one another more whole-heartedly. We trust that God wants to do through us, individually and together, what we could never accomplish on our own. God has saved us each one for a new quality of life and for new personal God-assignments.

The Psalmist offers this final prayer: one of the most beautiful in the Hebrew Bible. Now trusting this Almighty God, he ventures, "Search me, O God, and know my heart...Lead me in [the] way everlasting."

None of us has a heart so pure we could stand before the searing scrutiny of a holy God. But in the grace and truth we have beheld in Jesus the Son, God has invited us to share in His life everlasting.

When you ascend to heaven, in your time, by His grace, He will surely be there. Thanks be to God.

Psalm 139

- 1 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.
- 7 Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence?
- 8 If I ascend to heaven, You are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, You are there.
- 9 If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
- 10 even there Your hand shall lead me, and Your right hand shall hold me fast.
- 11 If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,"
- 12 even the darkness is not dark to You; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to You...
- 23 Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts.
- 24 See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.