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The book of Psalms has long been venerated for its intensely emotional and plainly honest words to God. While the prophets speak God's words to us and the historical accounts of the Old Testament tell us the story of God's involvement in the lives of the ancient Israelites, the psalms uniquely express human longings, fears, and thanksgivings offered up to the Creator, Sustainer, Redeemer – our Heavenly Father.

Within the psalms we find a wide variety of human reactions to God. At times psalmists are afraid of evil enemies, praying for their destruction; other times someone is lamenting the sorrow we live with and praying for God's mercy. Through the psalms readers today enter into joyful thanksgiving and calm assurance in God's love for us. I think the continued appeal of the psalms more than 2000 years after their being collected is expressed well by W. S. McCullough when he says:

“What lies behind these outpourings of Israel's soul can, in fact, be re-enacted both by the sinner and by the saint, by the wayfaring man and by the scholar. Later generations can imitate the psalmists; they can stand, as it were, on their shoulders; they can think their thoughts after them and catch some of their faith and vision; they can in short, be led by them into the secret of the Most High.”¹

There is much to discuss when it comes to understanding when and by whom the psalms were written. It seems they come from a variety of sources, including a Davidic collection, Levitical collections and others that

¹ Interpreter's Bible, Psalms Introduction, 4.

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are unidentifiable – all of this happened a few centuries before the opening of the Christian Era.²

From a literary point of view the psalms take the forms of poems, prayers and songs, some of which had liturgical significance in ancient Israel – that is, they were used regularly during worship and other religious activities – and others seem more closely tied to personal devotions.

Regardless of their form each psalm must have had countless faithful people bare witness to its usefulness in worship, prayer and praise.

Let us consider where Psalm 139 fits into these categories – some scholars think of this psalm as a lament, choosing to focus on the prayer for deliverance from enemies in vv 19-22. Others suggest that these verses are a serious thematic problem and are not in fact part of this psalm – choosing to deal with only vv 1-18 and 23-24. From this point of view it is suggested that the psalmist is revelling in the wonder of God's creation of him or her as an individual. This seemingly straightforward psalm does become problematic with the shifting tone of vv 19-22 which focus on destruction of the wicked who rise up against God and yet there in this problem lies the true beauty of the psalms. Like the passionate ache of a first romantic love or the bitter-sweet of a life lived and lost we face contradictory emotions in our experiences every day.

No matter whether you shift these verses into another psalm – they still exist and they still express a side of our religious heritage and current

² Ibid, 3.

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religious climate that we sometimes find offensive and other times fully embrace!

What we find is a psalm that proclaims the all-knowing, all-encompassing wisdom and creative genius of God while also perhaps highlighting the wily and manipulative nature of humanity making a case for itself or maybe the passion of a great human defender of God's action in the world – does this sound mashed up and mixed up and confusing – yes it does – isn't it beautiful? Isn't that some scripture you can sink your teeth into? Like a sumptuous salty-sweet treat that sounds strange to eat yet becomes one's favourite upon trying it – think chocolate covered pretzels ...

Isn't the awe inspiring portrait of God's perfect knowledge of us set against the honest feelings of one small human soul something that strikes fear and pleasure in our minds simultaneously? Is this conundrum not something worthy of bringing to God in a lusty prayer for understanding? Something to roll around in and make you loose sleep?

What a grand emotional and theological journey the psalms offer us. Perhaps this is what a walk in the park with our God is like ... both fearful and wonderful.

In psalm 139 the psalmist praises God's creation and knowledge of every detail of his life long before it is even set into motion – God knows his thoughts from far away and his words before they are on his tongue, as the psalmist steps forward he bumps into God in front of him, turning quickly he finds God closely behind him and in fact also above him, like a mime in an

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invisible box. God's ability to be with the psalmist even stretches into Sheol, the abode of the dead where it was believed one loses all knowledge of God – whether the psalmist knows God or not, God knows him, even in Sheol.

If he travels the speed of light like the wings of dawn's first light he cannot escape God's guidance. The darkness of night that shields thieves and dangerous animals is not enough to hide the psalmist from God's sight. The darkness of human intentions cannot be hidden from the light that is the Lord of all creation. The psalmist may know God through the wonder of creation all around him, not least of which is his own human form, knit or carefully embroidered and woven together in the darkness of his mother's womb. One commentator asks what sorts of creations might even the greatest of human artisans produce within the deepest darkness – while God produces the most intricate, fearful and wonderful of all creations in the darkest depths of the earth.

Finally, totally overwhelmed by the amazement of God's creation of him, the psalmist endeavours to count the vast sum of God's weighty thoughts – they are more than all the sand grains of the earth and yet in the end there is God still with him. All of this makes a reader's head spin and heart ache.

Up to now this psalm would be an excellent candidate for most popular – you know like if this psalm were a high school student running for President of Student Council it would win hands down because of its beauty and its ability to fit in with any crowd – I mean even an atheist might appreciate its poetic images and romantic sentiments, right? This is a silly illustration I

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know but it's true that so far this psalm is pretty hard not to accept – it goes down smooth like a cool glass of water on a warm day. So what about verses 19 through 22?

What happens when we consider this psalm in its entirety? From a holistic point of view – what lies behind the shift in tone from celebrating God's perfect knowledge of the psalmist's every moment to expressing hate for enemies and calling God to action against them? How can such a cool drink of water become a seething sea of vipers so quickly??

Approached from a logical point of view it seems plausible the psalmist is setting his case before the Lord. Since God has full knowledge of the psalmist God can search him and know that his heart is pure, that his devotion to God is complete and in turn the psalmist can call God to not only save him from the wicked but remind God that his devotion to God necessitates his hatred of those who lift themselves up against God. Because of his love for God, he cannot help but hate those who do not honour God. These are strong words and the sentiments behind them are raw and run deep.

The teachings of Jesus Christ help us to put these feelings of hatred toward God's enemies in perspective – they are certainly the expression of one person's love for God – coinciding with the greatest commandment which is to love God and with Christ's teaching of the second most important commandment (to love your neighbour) one must conclude that the spontaneous feelings offered up by the psalmist are not the end point of the process in God's eyes. Nevertheless these words find themselves

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embedded in Holy Scripture and so must be taken seriously by anyone who follows Christ.

In terms of his treatment of the wicked, John Calvin writes very seriously of those who "... make no secret of the contempt they entertain for God"³ saying that God's judgement for them is fitting. Calvin further explains an aspect of verse 20 by pointing out the danger of "... conceiv(ing) of (God) according to (our) own idle fancies." He suggests that those who "in words" acknowledge God to be judge of the world, but then quickly "denude him of his office of judgement" are engaged in a type of blasphemy that tarnishes God's glory. We cannot confess God as judge of the world and then place our own boundaries on when and how that judgement flows. God may know us inside out but we know very little of the mysteries of our Lord!

Calvin believes there is another lesson we need to draw from this psalm; that "...the keen sense we have of what concerns our private interest, honour, and convenience, makes us never hesitate to engage in contest when any one injures ourselves, while we are abundantly timid and cowardly in defending the glory of God."⁴ In other words we are willing to defend our own actions and interests to no end while we cower away when it is God's actions and interests that are being attacked.

And so it is that the uncomfortable, challenging words of verses 19-22 come to fit rightly with the previous proclamations of God's knowledge –

³ John Calvin, Commentary on the Psalms, Vol. 5, v. 20.

⁴ Ibid, v. 22.

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while God has perfect knowledge of us we indeed fail to know much of God, even what He reveals to us in His creation, yet we try to put God in a well defined and clearly labelled box – while God searches our souls for truth we insincerely search for God’s truth only in the places that are already familiar to us, all the while proclaiming to each other that our knowledge of God is full and complete.

To top off the case of the psalmist he offers up a lovely oath “confirming (his) solidarity with God”⁵ “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the life everlasting” (vv 23-24). This must be one of the most sincere and dangerous prayers of the whole of scripture. Who among us feels safe enough to ask our Lord to search our entire being, body, mind and soul, for even a crumb of wickedness?!

Who among us has so fully handed our lives over to the living God that we can lay bare our souls and find comfort in our trust for God and His love for us? The answer to all of this is grace. Only one whose knowledge although far from perfect, includes knowing God’s abiding and steadfast love for each and every one of us can dare to ask God to search the soul! God searches us and knows us as He has always known us – we may spend our lives seeking to know God further and deeper but as long as we learn of His grace and succumb to His guidance we will know more than enough – we too will be guided in the life everlasting, finding ourselves

⁵ The New Oxford Annotated Bible, commentary, 895 HB.

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sweetly hemmed in on all sides by God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Amen.