

Leader Notes

Text: Psalm 139

Clarity

Context and Background

Background: The psalms are the ancient hymnbook of the Hebrew people. They contain the honest reflections and heart cry of God's people. Like modern collections of poetry or song, the Psalter (the collection of psalms) is comprised of psalms by many authors. The superscripts or small words at the beginning of each psalm in our Bibles are actually the first lines of each psalm and record for us the author and the setting, musical instructions, and, or circumstance behind the psalm. We have no reason to doubt these superscriptions as being anything other than accurate. As one reads the psalms it is hard to miss that they are not all celebratory in nature. This is somewhat surprising to some. Are not songs of worship supposed to be celebratory? Perhaps as few as a third of the psalms are what we might call "upbeat." Approximately half of the psalms have a wintery feel as they deal with honest, hard issues of life. At times the psalmist can break out in fits of rage against his enemies, and even at times against God, even in the midst of what seems to be upbeat praise. The presence of these psalms and outbreaks within psalms indicate the honesty and integrity with which the psalmists approached God offering insight into how God desires all of His people to approach Him. God's people can be honest with Him, about life, their feelings, and their faith. God's people can pour out their hearts to Him and it is all worship. Perhaps this is the greatest truth we learn from the psalms. The worship of God by His people is nothing more than honestly approaching and engaging God.

Context: This psalm was written by David and was intended to be used in worship. The psalm is a stirring reflection on God as all-powerful, ever-present, and all-knowing (Psalm 139.1-18). It is with this God that David feels he can be brutally honest about trauma he has experienced at the hands of others (Psalm 139.19-22), and asks that God be equally honest with him in return. It is this honest dialogue with an all-knowing, ever-present, all-powerful God that David sees as a prerequisite for living the life God intends for His people (Psalm 139.23-24). As a psalm intended for worship, David calls people to reflect on the nature of God and their own nature so that they might move forward toward the life God intends for them.

The Text

Knowing God: David begins this soaring psalm by reflecting on the nature and character of God, calling people to recognize who God is, to know Him. God is first and foremost the God who knows us. God knows who we are to the core of our being, perhaps better than we know ourselves. He knows our innermost thoughts and attitudes. Nothing that we are, think, or do, is hidden from God (Psalm 139.1-6). Not only does God know His people, but God is ever-present with them. Should one ever desire to flee from God, they would find such effort fruitless. God simply will not let His people go. There is no place too distant, too far, too dark for God, for God is found everywhere. This God is one who desires to be with His people (Psalm 139.7-12). What is striking to David is that this God who knows and is present with His people is powerful to act in their lives. God has the ability not only to be present in all circumstances and seasons but is powerful to act in them as well (Psalm 139.13-16). While one might be tempted to fear this all-knowing, all-powerful, ever-present God, David states that such fear is without basis. This God who is always with us, who knows who we really are loves us nonetheless. God has precious thoughts for His people, more than can be counted. This God that David calls us to know is a God who loves, a God who draws near, a God who knows us and does not frown, but His face is marked with a smile. This God, this loving God is safe. David contemplates how this love perhaps is the very reason that God is ever-present (Psalm 139.17-18).

Knowing ourselves: David calls out to this all-knowing, ever-present, all-powerful God with complete honesty. At first, David's words are shocking. How can we call out to God with hatred in our hearts? How can one speak with such venom concerning their enemies? Is this what God wants in worship? Whatever the circumstances behind David's words, it is clear that he has experienced some sort of trauma at the hands of those he calls his enemies. He knows enough of their actions to know that their behavior is not fitting with the life God desires. David also knows enough about God to understand that God already knows how he feels. God knows his hurt, his animosity, his pain. Rather than hide from the God who already knows, David approaches God by laying it all on the table. With complete honesty David tells God how he feels. He knows God well enough to know that such honesty will not offend God or cause Him to draw away with hurt feelings. By airing his feelings to God, in fact David is calling upon God to act in his life, to bring about transformation, to deal with his feelings. In his honesty, he is expressing his dependency upon God. In the midst of David's honesty, he calls out to God to make clear what lies beneath the surface, beneath the level of his own awareness. David understands that he has parts of himself that he is not cognizant of, deep parts, hidden anxieties, attitudes and actions that threaten to trip him up and lead him to a "tormented life" (literal translation of vs. 24). He wants nothing less than the everlasting life God intends for him. However, he knows that which lies beneath the surface must be dealt with. He must somehow face who he is, really, so that God might transform even his hidden parts. Therefore, David calls out to God to make these areas known to him. While this might seem somewhat of a frightening prayer, David trusts God. He knows that God is safe, one that draws near in love, one that is able to act even on the hidden parts.

Application: Who is God, really? For many of us, God wears a frown. He sits upon His throne as the Almighty Judge waiting to zap us for yet another failing. We cower in fear of this God. We hide from this God who threatens to punish, even abandon us if we fail once more. We wear a mask before this God, feigning praise and joy when our hearts are full of pain fearing His response. This is not the God David knows. God is all-knowing, ever-present, and all-powerful. He sees all we are and all we do, and he draws near. He draws near in love. He is safe, one who can be trusted, one that knows us better than we know ourselves and loves us anyway. Because God is safe, we can be honest with Him and ask Him to be honest back with us. We can lay out our hurts, disappointments, unfulfilled desires, even our animosity, envy, and rage for in doing so God brings healing, transforming by and through His presence and power. Still further, we can ask God to bring these same things that we have hidden to ourselves to the surface, knowing that in so doing we find a God who cleanses and transforms our lives.

Prayer: Brings God into Life

Discussion Guide 1

Psalm 139

Getting Started: 10 minutes

- Do you think it is really possible to “know yourself?” Can you elaborate?

Diving Into the Text: 60 minutes *(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a simple road map through the text. Feel free to use these questions in ways that best fit your group and the dynamics of your own meeting.)*

Setting the Stage: *“Know thyself.” These words have echoed down through the ages. Do we really want to act upon them? Sure we know what lies on the surface, but do we know what lies beneath? Do we want to know? Honestly, “no.” To know what lies beneath is to know who I am, really. It is to know and acknowledge the full weight of life’s disappointments, those unmet expectations, unfulfilled desires, the worries and anxieties that haunt the recesses of my soul, those ghosts I would rather forget. To know what lies beneath means I have to be honest with who I am, be honest with my envy, my selfishness and self-indulgence, my brokenness and the brokenness I cause, my ambition and destructive consumerism. To know who I am means I have to own up, fess up, and in the end clean up. To become aware of who I am is to become aware of that which must change. I am afraid. Afraid of who I am. Afraid of who I am to become. Most of all, I am afraid of God. What will God say if He realizes who I am, who I am really? Will He love me, care for me, draw near to me or will He flee from the toxic mess of what lies beneath? What will God’s reaction be if what lies beneath comes forth? I am afraid, afraid of knowing myself, most afraid of God knowing me. . .or does He already, and is drawing near in love simply waiting for me to acknowledge the same?*

- Read Psalm 139.
- In what ways was the psalmist known by God?
- How did the psalmist seek to know himself as God knew him?
- What might have been the psalmist’s reasons for desiring to know himself as God knew him?
- In what ways do you see people attempting to know themselves? What are their reasons?
- How are modern approaches to knowing ourselves similar or dissimilar from that of the psalmist?
- Do you believe the surfacing of what lies deep within us is a necessary step toward the life God has for us? Can you elaborate?
- What, if anything, keeps you from approaching God to hear honestly from Him?
- Is there anything in Psalm 139 that encourages you to approach God to hear honestly from Him? Can you elaborate?
- As a group, pray Psalm 139:23-24 together. Allow for 5 minutes of silence to make room for God to speak. Afterward, talk about what God said. Or, consider covenanting together to pray this prayer daily this week and to come back and discuss what God said. (Note: We often struggle to be completely still and silent. It isn’t part of our normal lives. You might preface this exercise by acknowledging the awkwardness, noting however that the practice of silence and stillness is actually a spiritual discipline, one that makes room for God to speak and act in our lives.)

Wrapping Up: 20 minutes

- Prayer requests
- Group Prayer time
- House-keeping matters (assignments for the next meeting)