Magnitude of God: Omniscience and Omnipresence, Psalm 139, Book 1

Al Sanders
THE MAGNITUDE OF GOD

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Years ago, I had the opportunity of presenting my first Sunday sermon as an assignment while a student at Biola. I remember vividly that evening in Pomona; both the excitement and nervousness. When it was over I breathed a sigh of relief, as I'm sure the audience must have, too. The thought had crossed my mind: How could a preacher find enough different subjects to occupy his ministry over a period of an entire year? You see, in my immature thinking, it seemed to me that perhaps there were only three major points to the gospel. These I felt were, 1) that one needs to acknowledge himself a sinner; 2) then one has to believe in Jesus Christ as Savior; and 3) that one should confess the Lord before others. How could a pastor find enough material to embellish these three points and hold attention? Now, while those are certainly most important “ABC's” for salvation, they certainly don’t in any sense begin to fathom the depths and riches of the wonderful truths to be found in the Word of God.

As we begin to search these riches together, I'd like to direct our meditations toward the 139th Psalm. We find, perhaps better than in any other passage of Scripture, the magnitude of God in four specific, non-duplicated areas of
His character. Nowhere is His omniscience, omnipresence, omnipotence and, what we might term His "omnirighteousness," more strikingly set forth. At the same time, nowhere do we find a more emphatic assertion of man's personality as distinct from that of deity.

I can remember a friend recently asking me if I'd ever studied Psalm 139. She knew how much I love and treasure the entire Book. Remarking to her that I'd read it on numerous occasions, but had never really taken time to go into the depths of each verse, analytically, she encouraged me with these words. "Al, that Psalm has meant so much to me. I hope someday you'll find it to be as spiritually rewarding to you!" And she was so right. Certainly it has been just that in these weeks of studying and preparing for this message.

An Answer to One's Identity Crisis

Psalm 139 answers the ponderous question "Who am I?" of those seeking an answer to their identity crisis. Hand in hand with answers to one's personal identity, one cannot read these 24 verses without coming to a stark realization of the presence, power and personality of our blessed God!

First of all, before we look at the actual verses, note for a moment the inscription which declares that it is addressed to the "Chief Musician". Although many of the Psalms have this same general inscription, it's interesting to realize that the last time this title appeared in just this same fashion was back in chapter 109 - 30 chapters earlier. Psalms addressed to the Choir Director have particular significance. The reason, I believe, is because it's worthy of the most excellent of soloists. Furthermore it is designated to be heard in public worship.

An Exaltation of the Most High

It was one of the greatest Hebrew scholars who ever lived, Aben Ezra, who declared, "This is the most excellent and glorious Psalm in the whole book." My feelings are exactly the same after considering these precious truths.

We could easily ask, "How could a shepherd boy like David arrive at such high thoughts?" That, my friends, is another clarification of how we know that it was actually the Holy Spirit who gave the Psalmist the very words to say.

Looking now to its structure, we discover each stanza in progression deals with God's omniscience, omnipresence, omnipotence and, adding a fourth category which is sometimes overlooked, His "omni-judgment."

Being of Scottish background, I was traditionally interested in what a theologian from Scotland by the name of Erskine had to say relative to the 139th Psalm. He vowed, "This is the very passage I would like to have before me on my death bed." What would be the last thing we'd want to see before closing our eyes and going to glory? Certainly, Psalm 139 does have that much import, interest and inspiration for our admonition and understanding.

Have you ever been in a meeting where you felt the presence of God so close to you that you could almost reach out and touch Him? Well, in a way, that's exactly how I feel about this Psalm.

We're immediately impressed with the number of pronouns used. It makes the reading so personal and not a cold or abstract thing whatsoever. God is specifically named six times. He is referred to pronominally 30 times with words like "Thou," "Thine," "Thy" and "Thee." On the other side of the ledger, the Psalmist speaks of himself 50 times, 16 times using the word "me" and 15 times using the word "my". So it is an intensely personal document dealing with the revelation of God in our daily lives.
God's Omniscience

Let's now begin to look at these verses one by one. David opens up his heart by saying, "O Lord, Thou hast searched me, and known me." Although he's talking about Jehovah, who knows all things, it is not so much that God is omniscient as it is that the all-knowing One is intimately acquainted with me! In the original Hebrew the word "search" has several backgrounds. It means such things as soldiers looking for contraband or pillagers ransacking a house looking for plunder. Of course, in those two cases the investigators involved have no knowledge of where the item is for which they're seeking. Not so with God. The Lord knows all things naturally without any effort whatever. He doesn't need a search warrant to come into our lives desperately hunting for the unknown. Everything is open before Him.

Another word some translators supply is "dig," with the idea of looking for valuable gold or silver.

Some years ago I heard of a man back in Ohio who had become so enamored with the thought of making millions of dollars by searching for diamonds, that he sold his farm and left for Africa. After wasting away every dime he had ever been able to accumulate, he came home broken both in spirit and health, only to find that the farm which he had sold to another had been found to contain vast stores of oil on it. The discovery made the new owner a wealthy person.

Digging Into Our Hearts

What do you look for in life? God digs in you to find out what needs you have. A phrase that was in vogue several years ago, which indicated we understood someone, or that we were on their same wavelength, was "I dig you!" That's exactly what David is testifying here, "O Lord, You dig me. You understand me. You know me completely." This searching, from a human standpoint, always implies a lack of knowledge, but not so with the Lord.

I remember some years ago when our daughter Peggy first got a set of contact lenses. She lost one of them while playing in the back yard on the lawn. We did everything we possibly could to locate that lens; it was like looking for a needle in a haystack. We didn't know where the contact lens was, but such small and minute things God knows and He knows them naturally and completely.

I read the other day that a television camera had been developed in Australia which is so small it can be inserted into a wire and dropped into the stomach of a patient. In this way the doctors can actually see what problems are developing, having a miniaturized camera and I suppose the benefit of instant replay. While the physicians can see difficulties which might exist, unfortunately they still don't have all the answers. There are still many problems far too acute, remaining both ponderable and unanswerable.

A Personal Knowledge

Note how personal this verse is. It's not, "O Lord, You know all things." That, of course, is true. But the exclamation comes in understanding the fact, "O Lord, You know me!" It was that great Baptist minister of days gone by, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, who observed that the heart of the Gospel is in its personal pronouns. Psalm 23 is certainly a good example of that. Because, when you get right down to it, it's just God and you in the universe. Stop and consider that fact.
This searching, this knowing is not something that has taken place in the past. It’s an ongoing experience. It’s in the ever-present tense and it’s a full investigation, a full disclosure. Think of all the reports that came out of the Watergate era of investigations in Washington. I recall that, for a time, we didn’t know whom to believe or just what was true. But God knows—without any full investigation. He knows naturally. As a matter of fact, this word “know” in Hebrew means to be able to discern everything perfectly and correctly all at one time. He searches and probes the purposes and intents of our hearts!

Do you realize how terrible it would be if in our human minds we knew everything perfectly all at one time? For example, just think in one area. If you knew what tomorrow held, the problems with which you might be confronted at your office or in your home; the illness that could easily become a terminal situation with you; the involvements of your young people in sin and immorality. If we knew all of these things, why it would only breed confusion and despair. And that arises from the imperfection we have in our lives. This is why our God alone is omniscient, because He knows everything perfectly and at once. One of the kindest things He has done for us is to put a veil over tomorrow’s unknowns.

Now there’s one other thing which I think is fascinating about this first verse. Note that the word “me” is in italics; it’s been supplied by the translators. If you drop that off, you would perhaps get a better view of what David is trying to say. “O Lord, Thou hast searched me and known ....” Everything is there, completely revealed!

Have you ever been sitting in a church service listening to the message, hearing the challenge the servant of the Lord has tried to present? You know, it’s all too easy to turn aside or to think the impact should be for someone else when those sharp arrows begin to come your way. But God is constantly and continually searching our hearts. You can rest assured that He knows the needs we have individually.

The Lord knows exactly what we are, even though we’re so slow to know ourselves. It’s like seeing your own photograph. Frequently we’ll observe or comment as most people usually do, “Is that really me?” Of course it is, but we just don’t take the time to truly know ourselves, much less the needs we each experience.

**He Knows Both the Good and the Bad**

A year or so ago we were looking for a key person for a special staff position. Probably about ten or twelve people were interviewed, as well as many others who were consulted for opinions. It was interesting to find that only two things actually emerged about each candidate. Everything that was good about the individual, that person wanted us to know firsthand. Everything bad about him, other people wanted us to be sure to know. From a human standpoint, that’s very common.

God is searching out our lives right now. He knows both the good and the bad. I heard a woman comment just recently, “My husband and I went together for three years before our wedding. But I never really knew him until we were married and I asked him for money.” The implication is that before marriage things were on a different basis, but after that new relationship, somehow all the glaring faults came out.

Aren’t you glad the Lord Jesus loved us, even knowing all our faults? How wonderful to know that even while we were yet sinners, enemies of His love, He gave His life for us. Listen, God knows you better than you know yourself and
The amazing thing is that He loves you just the same. And I say that for myself as well.

Verse two brings the suggestion into even sharper focus. David observes, “Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising; Thou understandest my thought afar off.” Two of an individual’s most common acts are sitting down and getting up. How many times a day do we do these things? We may not really know or understand why we do it. Sometimes it’s for a physical reason; to get more comfortable. At other times it may be for the most insignificant of reasons. At any rate God knows even the smallest thing about us—when we get up and when we sit down. The very hairs of our head are numbered.

There is another thing here, too, beyond the physical aspect of sitting down and getting up. I believe it alludes to times of sinking down in discouragement and disappointment or rising in pride and conceit. In these aspects of “downsitting and uprising,” God knows all about our needs. And David has put them in the proper sequence, too. Action (uprising) follows meditation (downsitting). There is the passive—the downsitting—and the active—the uprising—and the Lord knows, all too well, each cause of these in our existence.

I used to enjoy looking at a cut-away beehive down at Knott’s Berry Farm, not too far away from our Biola campus. I don’t know if they still have it. It was right at the entrance to the berry market, I believe, and one could see these energetic bees as they moved in and out of the hive, filling up with honey and then waxing all the various cavities that were there. There’s a beautiful analogy in this, when we realize that to others we are like opaque beehives. No one can possibly see what’s being done on the inside. They can see everything on the exterior, even the thoughts which come out in word and deed, but what takes place on the inside no one knows except God. And to the Lord we’re like that cut-away beehive at Knott’s Berry Farm. He can see everything that’s happening on the inside. He understands our thoughts afar off.

God’s Knowledge Transcends Time And Distance

Now where is God? Well we realize that He is omnipresent, that is everywhere present at the same time. But where His dwelling place in heaven is, no one can be sure. We understand light travels at a tremendous rate of speed, but suppose the Lord were 20 billion light years away. You see, the real question isn’t the possible distance of God, for that makes absolutely no difference. The amazing thing to realize is that He knows our ideas long before we even comprehend them.

We may not realize why we think of certain things—whether it’s something we see on television, as a result of some glimpse that we have of some activity of this world or whatever the reason may be. But God knows and, as a matter of fact, He knew those things long before they ever took hold in our lives. This is why we realize the frailty of our own beings and how temptation would so often come in upon us to foolishly persuade and destroy. The tempter will always seek to bring defeat instead of God’s available victory. This is why, in the wisdom of the book of Proverbs we read, “Keep thy heart with all diligence, for out of it are the issues of life.”

Verse three continues, “Thou compassest my path and my lying down, and art acquainted with all my ways.” I enjoy using the New American Standard Bible. It’s an excellent translation and we would commend it to you. In this version, there’s some additional insight in two areas of this verse. The first is “compassest,” which really means to scrutinize and
carefully investigate. The second is a modification of the word “acquainted.” In the original, as it’s reflected in the NASB, it is not just a passing friendship, but rather “Thou art intimately acquainted with all my ways.” Here again we see a similar theme as in the previous passage. My activities, my paths, my rest and my lying down are all known to God. You see, we’re totally surrounded by our God.

Seldom do we take thought of the air around us, except here in Southern California where it becomes so polluted that we can hardly breathe. Yet we are surrounded in every nook and cranny by air. Whether we are awake or asleep the air still surrounds us. So does God surround us with His love. David says, “I may leave your path, O God, but You never leave mine. I may sleep, but You never do. You know every single habit, good and bad of my life.”

I remember some years ago during the London blitz attacks of World War II, there was a woman who was a dear saint of God. She found that she could rest even when there were those terrible attacks by the German buzz bombs. One day a preacher asked her how it was that she could sleep so peacefully. She responded, “Well, you know, pastor, you told us that God never sleeps nor slumbers. And I just figured there was no use the both of us staying awake.” Yes, God scrutinizes even how we are in our sleep. He takes note of every step, whether it be right or wrong. The Psalmist is saying, “Lord, you know each and every habit of my life.”

**Acquainted With Our Ways**

Now we substituted “scrutinize” for “compassest,” but in the original it has more of a farming idea; that of winnowing the wheat. We’ve seen pictures of how, with a tray of wheat facing the wind, the kernels are thrown into the air so that the chaff is separated from it and blown away. The wheat remains. This is what God wants to do in our lives. He wants to “winnow out” those ways that are unseemly to Him and not for His glory. Yes, the Lord is intimately acquainted with all our ways.

The other day we received a telephone call from one of our relatives who said, “We’re at such and such a corner and we’re trying to get over to your house, but we just can’t remember the way.” Actually there are three different ways a person can come to our home. It’s a little different when it comes to going to Chicago. There are probably hundreds of ways, maybe even thousands. But when it gets right down to being in God’s way, there is only one. Jesus Christ said, “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life; No man cometh unto the Father but by Me.” How sad that He had to tell the religious leaders of His day, “For My ways are not your ways.” Oh, how closely intimate and beautiful are these thoughts. It’s as if there were only two beings in the entire universe: you and God. I wonder, are we really walking in His ways?

As we read on, the Psalmist further reveals the all-knowing omniscience of the Lord to us. I’m sure all of us were amazed some years ago when we read about the very sad and, I’m sure, traumatic divorce of the well-known newspaper columnist, Ann Landers. Frankly, I know absolutely nothing about that situation, and she has my sincere sympathy—whatever the causes may have been. I don’t mean to single her out because of what took place in her life after three-and-a-half decades of marriage. But what impressed me was the evaluation she gave of the situation. In her own words, which she was open enough to declare to the readers, she said, “The lady with all of the answers doesn’t know the answer to this one!” But, my friend, you can be assured of one solid fact and that is that God does know the answers.
Verse four explains, “For there is not a word in my tongue but, lo, O Lord, Thou knowest it altogether.” You see, it’s like a seed in the soil. The results are eventually known. When we had a new yard put in at our home several years ago, apparently somebody mixed tomato seeds in with the fertilizer, or at least they got there somehow. As a result, we’ve had tomato plants all over the place for the past five of six years. It’s amazing what happens to a little seed, but even more amazing is what happens to a word that comes from between our lips which may bring unfortunate comments and caustic thoughts and observations to those who hear it.

**Silence Can’t Conceal Our Thoughts**

The use of the negative statement here makes the situation even more emphatic. Every word is well known before it is even spoken. You see, silence can’t conceal our thoughts. God knows each of them. Just because you bite your tongue and hold your comments doesn’t mean that God isn’t aware of the evil thoughts in your heart. It’s true we can often repent of speaking, but seldom do we repent of silence. This, then, is a picture of our relationship to God, not just to man.

My mother used to use a little phrase maybe you’ve heard before: “Be silent and be thought a fool; speak and remove all doubt.” That’s so true from our standpoint with others. I agree with the Psalmist when he prayed, “O Lord, set a watch before the doors of my mouth.” But, you see, here in the 139th Psalm it’s not the mouth but rather the tongue. Notice how far back David goes. Before the word is spoken or articulated, yes, even before it’s ever formed, the Lord knows all about it. I’m so concerned, and often ashamedly convicted because of the curse of criticism. It can so easily sweep over our lives. Then, we’ll just cast it aside and ignore it as though it meant nothing to our spiritual decline.

Not too long ago there was a pastor who contacted me, wanting a recommendation about an individual I had employed some years ago. He wanted to know whether or not she would be suitable for a position he had in mind. I told him I thought she was excellent and could certainly fill the needs he had. He observed, “Well, I thought perhaps you’d say something like that. The only thing bothering me is that some of her family members are so critical. Frankly, I was afraid maybe she would be, too.” Yes, beware of a spirit of criticism that can become a blight on your own soul more than on anyone else’s.

The ancient philosopher Plutarch wrote these perceptive words, “Man may see thee do an impious deed, but God the very inmost thought can read.”

In verse five we get an even better picture of the Lord’s protecting hand upon us. “Thou hast beset me behind and before, and laid Thine hand upon me.” The New American Standard Bible provides the word “enclosed” as perhaps a little better understanding for “beset.” It’s as though God is behind us recording all our sins or else blotting them out in His grace. But He’s also before us, foreknowing the deeds and providing for our needs.

**Surrounded By The Lord**

We can actually say our loving heavenly Father has enfolded His arms around us in His matchless grace. This is in keeping with other Psalms we’ve read, too. For instance, “The angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that
fear Him . . . and delivereth them.” And again, “He shall give His angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways.”

“He has beset me: He has enclosed me.” In Hebrew the word means to be hemmed in on all four sides, like a box. Nothing can escape God's all-knowing eye. I'm quite amazed these days at some of the things being uncovered and complained about relative to the highly secret investigative forces in our country. For instance, the CIA and its surveillance of U.S. citizens comes to mind. I may be very naive and display my ignorance by saying this, but quite frankly it doesn't disturb me greatly to think that there is some agency in this country responsible for checking up on what key decision-making people are doing, even at the highest levels of government. Even still, with all of their electronic bugging devices, they cannot discern what an individual has in his heart. The government surveillance doesn't extend in that direction. Yet here in the Psalm is an eye that can see far beyond the recesses of one's soul. Its observation begins even before the thought process has been culminated.

The words “Thine hand” in the authorized version, are better translated “the palm of Thine hand.” When I was a boy, I once had pneumonia. I think I must have been about 10 years of age and I was sick with a high fever. Oh, how good it felt to have my mother rub my forehead with the palm of her hand. It brought relief to the hot, damp brow. And this, here in verse 5, is even better than that. God places the protecting palm of His hand upon us for the comfort and strength we so desperately need. In Psalm 23 David sees the Lord in a similar position. He goes before him. For instance, “He leadeth me beside the still waters, He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness.” And then God also follows behind. “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

We have made nearly 125 trips to Dallas with our production ministry for the television programs. And whenever we have guests there they usually like to go downtown and see the place where President John F. Kennedy was assassinated. We will drive down a little gravel road by the freeway and point out the Texas Book Depository building from which structure (on the sixth floor) sources indicate the President was fatally shot. It happened just as he went down toward the underpass. There was a motorcade in front of him and one behind him; guards were watching everywhere. Unfortunately, however, there was no protection from above.

But you can be sure that there is from God. He boxes us in, not just behind and before, but then He puts the very palm of His hand of love upon us; the softest part. Now understand that's not just for physical protection but also, and more importantly, for spiritual sustenance as well.

It causes me to break out singing that old song of Scottish background. We used to love it so well that we'd sing it at our summer Bible conferences: “Cheer up, ye saints of God, there's nothing to worry about, nothing to make you feel afraid, nothing to make you doubt. Remember, Jesus never fails, so why not trust Him and shout? You'll be sorry you worried at all tomorrow morning.”

I was at our printer's the other day and saw on the wall a motto which is something they call “Murphy's Law.” It reads as follows: “Nothing is as easy as it looks. Everything takes longer than you expect, and if anything can go wrong, it will at the worst possible moment.” That's quite a depressing philosophy. And yet it's certainly unrealistic and unnecessary when we realize how wonderfully the Lord has provided for
us in every circumstance in our lives. Let's rejoice in His continued blessings as we look to Him for our strength and guidance.

"Such Knowledge Is Too Wonderful For Me"

There are many things that, quite frankly, completely "boggle" my mind. One example is the landing of a 747 jetliner. A pilot told me not too long ago the reason they come down so gently is because the entire controls are taken over by computer. It feels like a feather when they touch the runway. That absolutely amazes me.

In our television work I am completely astounded at the editing equipment which has been devised for putting programs together on video tape. Here again computers are utilized. An operator sitting at a special keyboard can control numerous machines, putting everything in its proper perspective and order, with the exact production codes coming out as though hours or days had been spent on the project. Truly it "boggles" my mind.

This is also true when you think of almost any other field of endeavor. For instance, in the area of medical science, consider some of the operations which are at the same time intricate and delicate, while still being life-saving. I read recently where surgeons are now working on operations of the heart, going in through the toes. They have a device which can accomplish the desired goal entirely in another part of the anatomy. It indeed "boggles" my mind. But all of these things are really nothing compared to the realization of God’s omniscience, omnipresence and omnipotence.

David testifies, “Such knowledge”—that is, the knowledge that God is protection at every side—“is too wonderful for me. It is high; I cannot attain unto it.” There’s an old proverb which states, “A wonder grows grayheaded in seven days.” That simply suggests that once you know the mechanics and the operations involved in a certain function, it’s no longer as mind-boggling as it perhaps was to you when you originally looked at it. The landing of a 747 seems routine to the pilots. The editing equipment for video tape productions is second nature to the operators and the surgeons are constantly finding new and better ways of taking care of man's ailments.

But the knowledge of God’s marvelous protecting love and concern is too wonderful ever to lose its marvel, even during the longest days of our lives. We may not have great educations, or on the other hand we may have forgotten all we know. But the most important thing anyone can learn, with or without an educational background, is to consider the omniscience of God.

And when we look at perfection, what happens is that it shows up all of our own imperfections. In this way we realize the urgent need of leaning more heavily upon Him. We have, after all, a very stinted amount of knowledge. Being associated with Biola University now for about 35 years, I certainly believe in education. But there's something special I appreciate most about the school. It's the fact that Biola’s premise and understanding is that the foundation, the starting point, the fountainhead for each student’s life, is a knowledge of God. Our dedicated faculty can then show our students how such knowledge is “too wonderful for me.”

David frankly testified, “It is high; I cannot attain unto it.”

If my memory serves me correctly it was Mark Twain who observed that every man is really a fool when you get him off the subject on which he was educated. Now, that could never be said of our Lord, for there is nothing, ab-
olutely nothing, unknown to Him. Here's a lesson we need to learn today and all our days. It's very true when we realize that it's what we learn after we think we know it all that really counts. This is what makes the difference in our outlook on life.

Smarter Than An IBM Computer

David observed the complicated system of the universe. He perhaps couldn't understand how all these things consisted or held together. He knew that never in his lifetime, or that of any other human being, could they compress an understanding of what it takes to put it all together. But God knows.

I've seen some tremendous computer installations, some that are able to store millions and millions of characters, or bits of information, which can be recalled instantaneously. And yet these are like insignificant toys compared to the omniscience of God. He knows everything and He doesn't need reels of IBM tape to store that memory.

With His eternal eye He surveys all of infinity. Have you ever taken a picture and gotten the proofs back—especially before the day when Photomat guaranteed you wouldn't have to pay for any pictures you weren't satisfied with—and your developed pictures were all out of focus? When God's omniscient eye looks at all eternity, nothing is ever out of focus. His knowledge is indeed too wonderful for me.

It's interesting to discover that the word “know” is found more than 200 times in the Bible. On the other hand, “guess” doesn't even appear once. We are reminded of the Apostle John's words in his first epistle, “These things have I written unto you that believe, that you may know that you have eternal life.” You may not have that perfect wisdom of God which sees beyond all the microscopic details of today, but you can know Him and have the assurance of life eternal.

The Psalmist concludes verse six of this chapter by realizing, “I cannot attain unto it.” I like that. Aren't you glad that we have a perfect Savior? Every one of us, no matter how good we may be or think we may be, have all missed the mark and come short of the glory of God. The Lord has given us His perfect truth to encourage and sustain us in our daily pathway.

God's Omnipresence

Now, we find the first major change in this chapter, because as we said earlier this is a four-stanza hymn of praise to the Lord, with six verses to each stanza. The first six dealt with the omniscience, or all-knowing eye of the Lord. The next six verses interestingly have to do with the universal presence of God—that is, that the Lord is everywhere present at the same time. From a theological standpoint, the term to express this characteristic is His omnipresence.

David says, “Where shall I go from Thy Spirit? Or whither shall I flee from Thy presence?” The question certainly strikes at the very heart of man's identity crisis. Just reading it flat out like that, we're immediately faced with the question, “Why would he want to flee?” I think as we said a moment ago, this again perfectly portrays man's imperfections for we all miss the mark! It shows how individuals are in their natural state, unredeemed, seeking to get away from the Lord. The hymnwriter expresses it, “Prone to wander, Lord...”
The Psalmist pondered, "Where shall I go to get away from Thy Spirit?" Man has constantly tried to avoid that most important of all encounters, only to discover in that avoidance absolute misery of soul and defeat of purpose. Let's remember those truths contained in the Word which tells us, "All things are open and naked to Him with whom we have to do."

The Fish That Can't Get Away

Down in Florida when we lived there, many sports fishermen would come to seek after the blue marlin. We were told, although I'm not much of a fisherman (I personally like to see all creatures in their natural state rather than taking them out), that when a marlin is hooked, it's generally given the length of the line to tire it out. Then it's slowly brought in to capture. Perhaps God has given you the length of the line, as it were. Your heart, if at one time it was given to Jesus Christ the Savior, may need to be drawn back to His presence just now. You can't escape Him, you can't avoid Him, you can't possibly get away from Him.

I'm afraid that too often, not just people of the world but some Christians as well, have the mistaken idea that God only dwells in heaven. That's not true at all. He's here in your home today. He's with you in your automobile, in the office or in that sick room. He's there, wherever you may be.

There's an old story that's often been repeated which bears on this subject. An atheist asked a Christian, "Where is God?" The believer responded simply, "You first tell me where He's not." It's like the astronauts several years ago who were told by the Russian cosmonauts while out in space that they didn't see God anywhere. One of our men, apparently with a good deal of understanding concerning Scriptures, observed, "All you'd have to do is just take one step out of your space craft, without any life support equipment, and you'd have met God." And he was right!

The Spirit Will Not Leave

Now David is praying, "Whither shall I go from Thy Spirit?" The relationship the king had with the third Person of the Trinity in those days was far different from what we can experience today. At that time the Spirit would come and leave a man, depending upon the circumstances or the sin that might be involved. We have a classic case of that in the life of Saul. The Spirit absolutely left him.

Today, when a believer receives Jesus Christ as Savior, he's indwelt by the Holy Spirit and He absolutely never leaves him. Make no mistake, the Spirit can be quenched, the Spirit can be turned aside, but He continues to reside within the tabernacle or the body of every individual who by faith has received Christ as personal Savior. You see, there's no place we can go as believers without taking the Spirit right along with us. And that's not only from a physical standpoint, but more impressively and what we often forget, we take the Spirit of God with us in our thoughts; when we look at things we know we shouldn't be seeing, or when we think things we know should never cross the mind of a child of God.

"Whither shall I flee from Thy presence?" Why, we can't run fast enough to get away from Him. Remember that television series, now in seemingly endless re-runs, about the "Six Million Dollar Man" who is put together by scientists after an air crash? He has his bionic equipment which sup-
posedly enables him to perform like the proverbial superman; outrace speeding cars, etc. But even with all that paraphernalia built in, we’d actually be hobbled, should we be given the same opportunity, for it’s impossible to flee from the presence of the Lord.

I’m afraid too many of us are like St. Augustine of old, who prayed sincerely, “Lord, make me holy... but not yet!” We still want our own way; we still want to be involved with those things that are not beholden for a believer. It was also Augustine who thankfully exclaimed, “The only way to flee from God is to flee to Him.” And that’s exactly what David understood.

The God Who Is There

Now in verse eight we begin a four-part answer to the rhetorical question just discussed. In the first part the Psalmist says, “If I ascend up into heaven, Thou art there; if I make my bed in hell, behold, Thou art there.” Perhaps you remember in an earlier study we pointed out that sometimes the words which are italicized can be left off. In this way a greater meaning can often be derived, because those words in italics were supplied by the translators and don’t appear in the original text. So, in this case, the verse would actually read, “If I ascend up into heaven, Thou art there; if I make my bed in hell, behold, Thou!” And the emphasis of exclamation is upon the realization that God is everywhere. He is omnipresent. It’s a staggering thought and one unredeemed people of the world can never even begin to comprehend.

Some time ago we were doing some interviews on the spot with people visiting Cypress Gardens, Florida. On this particular day we were asking folk from all over the United States and Canada what first came to their mind when they heard the word “heaven.” We got all kinds of responses. One fellow said he thought heaven would be like Cypress Gardens, but his wife reminded him that after having come down from Detroit last winter anything would look like heaven! We talked to one family where the mother and father declined to say anything. Their young son, however, wanted to be on television so he volunteered to participate. He asked what the question was so he could give it some thought. He was perhaps 10 or 11 years old, certainly no more than that. I told him simply that the question would be on the subject of heaven. He looked at me rather quizzically and then responded, “Well, what’s heaven?” I couldn’t believe my ears. His older sister, maybe 12 or 13, encouraged him, “Oh, you know what he means. That’s where grandmother’s supposed to be.” Now, that apparently was all that young child knew or had ever been told about heaven. What a sad commentary on the times in which we’re living!

God is in heaven, yes, but He’s other places, too. David grasped the truth, “If I make my bed in hell, behold, Thou art there!” It would be well to point out at this juncture that hell at the present time isn’t occupied. Of course, it was never created for man, but rather for the devil and his angels. It’s also important to realize that God never sends anyone to hell. Now of course that does not mean that no one will go to hell. Rather, by their own rejection of the Lord’s provision of salvation, Jesus Christ His Son, consign themselves, by their own decision, to that very real place of eternal torment and separation from God.

But in the original Hebrew the word here is not that for “hell,” but rather it is “hades” in the Greek, or the Hebrew term “sheol.” All it means is simply the abode of the dead. Without getting too involved at this point, let’s just simply
The Magnitude of God

point out that before the death and resurrection of Christ, hades was divided into two separate compartments. This we see clearly from the 16th chapter of Luke. There was the abode of the unrighteous dead, a place to which all unbelievers go today, awaiting the final Great White Throne Judgment, when all who are in the abode of the unrighteous dead will be consigned to hell forever. And there was also the abode of the righteous dead, sometimes called Paradise or Abraham's Bosom. David is simply saying, “If I go into the presence of God in heaven, I'll find the Lord there. And if I die and go into the abode of the righteous dead in sheol, He'll be there, too.” There's just no possibility of escaping Him whatsoever. From heaven to hades, from the utmost to the uttermost, He is there.

You Cannot Escape From God

I'd also like to pause just long enough to comment on what I believe is one of the devil's cleverest and most successful lies. And that is his trying to make people think that physical death ends all. In a sense he's right, but that should be clarified with the fact that it only ends all opportunity to change one's destiny for eternity. The guilt of the human conscience, which may weigh down an individual seeking to snuff out existence by suicide, really goes right on. The anguish and turmoil doesn't stop at physical death. That's the utmost foolishness of suicide. You can't possibly get away from God. If you make your bed in hell or hades, God's still there. Jonah tried to escape and he couldn't.

Some years ago Jim Vaus had a movie made of his life. I believe it was called "Wiretapper." It told the intriguing story of how, although he had attended Biola, he lived a rather displeasing life to the Lord while here, existing as a hypocrite. He became involved with organized crime as a wiretapper and through a series of circumstances which are long and involved, he eventually came to the Lord during a Billy Graham crusade. It was the historic 1949 encounter at the corner of Washington and Hill here in Southern California. In a song Ralph Carmichael wrote for that motion picture, which has since become quite popular, he says exactly what David is talking about,

I cannot hide from God, however I may try;
Though mountains cover me, I’ll not escape His eye.
I've wandered far and near, and yet His voice I hear,
I know that I can never hide from God.
How often in the past, I've gone my wicked way;
I knew I'd come at last to face another day;
When for my wasted years I'd pay in grief and tears,
I knew that I could never hide from God.
I cannot hide from Thee, dear Lord;
To escape Thee how often I've tried.
No rest shall I know while here below
'Till in Christ my soul shall hide.!

"If I go up into heaven," is a thought far better than flying with "The Friendly Skies of United!" It's the knowledge that should God call us to be with Himself, we will be instantaneously in His presence, for absent from the body means to be present with the Lord. I'm interested in the fact that David pondered, "If I make my bed in hades." It's not "If I go to hades," but, "If I make my bed there." The word in the Hebrew signifies bed as a place of inactivity. It shows that there's a lack of opportunity to do anything else whatsoever for one's life and eventual eternal destiny.

Verse nine reads further, "If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea." This
now is the second part of the answer to that rhetorical question of verse seven, which wonders, "How can I get away from God?" Let's just take that much to see what we might find of special interest.

Have you noticed how the majority of the space shots aren't launched in the middle of the night? Generally they're always early in the morning. That's the time of excitement and encounter for the new day just dawning. Now the picture here, "the wings of the morning" gives us the inconceivable rapidity with which light flies. It's almost an incalculable velocity—186,000 miles a second. The human mind can't even begin to get the idea, for instance, of how a sunbeam reaches us. So, David's saying, "Even though I might have that kind of ability, the speed of light, I couldn't get away from God."

Now we go from one extreme to the other: "If I dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea." Here the word "uttermost" doesn't mean distance horizontally but it means depth vertically. I'm fascinated by articles that have appeared in National Geographic Magazine showing how deep some of the ocean floors are. And I tell you, having been in the Merchant Marine during World War II out in the Pacific, as well as living in Florida on the Gulf Coast for six years, subject to those devastating hurricanes, I have a great respect for the oceans.

**From The Heights To The Depths**

We might use these two pictures for something more. It's the excitement of the new day when we're on top as it were, coupled with the discouragement or depths of despondency as seen in the oceans rolling over us. Now, David said from these two extremes, still I know God is there.

Vance Havner tells the story of an infidel father who tried to dissuade his young son about any need for personal faith in Jesus Christ. He painted a motto which he decided could be useful in instilling unbelief in his small boy. It was then hung up on the wall. It declared these three words, "God is nowhere." When his boy came home from school that day and saw the motto, he was excited. He told his daddy, "I see it now. That means just what our teacher at Sunday School has been saying, "God is now here." He made four words out of the three and he was more right than his educated father.

The Psalmist was not a pantheist. He believed in one God. Over in Rome they have an ancient building dedicated to all the different gods (the Pantheon). David wouldn't have been comfortable worshipping there. He resolutely believed in the one true God.

Taking the wings of the morning, going to the uttermost depths of the sea, he concludes in verse 10, "Even there shall Thy hand lead me, and Thy right hand shall hold me." Isn't it interesting, the use of the word "hand" in this passage? We saw it earlier in verse 5 where it says that we're boxed in, or we're taken care of from all sides. And the Psalmist ends with the assurance, "and laid Thy hand upon me." We pointed out it really is the palm of the hand, the softest part, that's in view. And, note now, here in verse 10, it's the right hand that's holding us. What's at God's right hand? Why, His Son, Jesus Christ. Do you realize that the Savior is the One who wants to hold your hand and take you through the darkest experiences of life?

I remember some years ago when our children were very small we lived in Santa Barbara, which is the town in which I grew up. On one occasion we took the youngsters to see the well-known Fiesta Parade that comes annually in August. Peggy, who was just a little tyke then, barely able to walk, afraid perhaps of the horses, the floats and all of the crowds,
said, “Daddy, would you take my hand?” Oh, those words were precious. I long to hear them again, though I probably never will. Did you ever stop to think how God would love to hear you say, “Heavenly Father, will You take my hand?” Yes, “Thy right hand shall hold me.” That’s Jesus Christ!

**Darkness Cannot Hide Us From God**

Now, in verse 11 we pick up the concern for darkness as a means of being hidden from God. A couple of months ago we were coming home from Chicago and the traffic controllers at the airport tower were having a problem getting all the planes out. It was a popular departure time—6:00 p.m.—so there were approximately twenty planes in line ahead of us for take-off. The captain of our American Airlines DC-10 explained the difficulty and then proposed, “If you’d like, folks, you can turn your headsets to Channel 11 and listen with us (the two-way radio communication between the pilots and the control tower) so that you can tune in on what we hear in the cockpit.” Say, that was fascinating and the time fairly flew by as we listened to the interesting conversations.

I copied one down because it was really amusing. One of the pilots, somewhere out at the end of the runway, called into the tower a little bit frantic. In a rough paraphrase he said, “Hey, you cleared two 727’s but actually there’s only one out here!” There was a pause and then the voice from the tower responded, “You’d better keep on looking.” There was still more pause and conversations went on between other airliners and the control tower. Finally the relieved voice came back to report, “Okay. You’re right. I found it in the dark. There are two 727’s out here.” Whereupon the control tower operator observed, “Say, that wasn’t nice. It’s not good to fool Mother Nature!”

It’s a fact that the darkness can often envelop our lives and even play tricks on us. Darkness signifies that which is unknown and foreboding. Yet, here David says, “I can’t shut God out.”

I never liked the darkness when I was a boy; in fact, I don’t enjoy it even now when I’m alone. I can remember how my mother would sometimes comfort me with the words, “Remember, son, in heaven there’ll be no night there.” I didn’t know anything about the book of Revelation in those days, but it was a comfort to realize that someday we wouldn’t have to experience that eclipse of the Lord. God isn’t dependent upon light.

On rare occasions we’ll drive through Beverly Hills with guests from out of town. It is a breathtaking sight to see all of those absolutely amazing and gorgeous mansions with their lovely estates. Somebody might wishfully comment, “Oh, wouldn’t I give everything I had to live in a place like that!” I’ll generally respond, “Well, I wouldn’t. I’d be petrified at night.” In fact, we visited the home of a doctor high atop one of the Hollywood hills, a beautiful home looking down upon Rudolph Valentino’s famous estate, all of the city and Lake Hollywood. It was here that the owner of the house had apprehended criminals who were not the first to break into his mansion. He shot one of them, but the other one got away, not however, before firing and crippling the doctor for life.

“Men love darkness,” John says, “because their deeds are evil.” No human eye can scrutinize the actions, but that doesn’t mean God isn’t aware of them. No darkness, physical or mental, can hide us from God.
The Light In The Midst Of Darkness

"Surely the darkness shall cover me." No, it cannot, not with God's presence. In our home, because I'm frequently traveling on the road, we've had flood lights installed with a master switch in the bedroom so that if Margaret hears anything at night, all she has to do is flip a switch and immediately the ground around the home is flooded with light. That's helpful, but that's not even what David is talking about when he says, "Even the night shall be light around me." He's referring to the fact that the night is just the same as the day. "God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all."

Let me just tuck in this little thought. God sometimes allows us to be put in the dark in order to prove to us that He is light. Do you feel like you're in darkness today? Then look to the Lord for your light and your strength. Nothing can hide you from God. Not even that which hides everything else.

Verse 12 continues, "Yes, the darkness hideth not from Thee, but the night shineth as the day; the darkness and the light are both alike to Thee." Again, we can delete the italics because this sentence just sums up all the previous ones as to the presence of the Lord. "The darkness and the light... are both alike." No difference.

I remember when we were children we used to love to play hide-and-go-seek. Seldom did we do it in the daytime. It was always more fun at night because you couldn't find one another. But nothing can hide us from God, not even that which hides everything else. The darkness and the light are both alike. God can see no matter how dark it may be.

Let me give you a little story about a boy, we'll call him Johnny, who spilled his milk in the kitchen just before he went to bed one night. His mother told him, "Johnny, go outside and get the mop." He protested, "But mom, it's dark out there and I'm scared." He began crying in fear and his mother tried to comfort him with the thought, "Don't forget, Johnny, Jesus is out there watching you." Finally, he braved himself enough to open the door a crack and stick his head out. He called out, "Lord, if you're out there, will you please hand me the mop?"

Humor aside, it is comforting to know that God is always there; always available for our every need. It's true we can never hide from Him, but what's equally true is the fact that He will never leave us nor forsake us. This omniscient and omnipresent God yet loves each of us in such a personal way that we can commit our very beings to Him, knowing He will ever be at our side.