

Songs of the Spirit/Psalms for the Seasons of Life

Trembling

Psalm 139

Rev. T.J. Campo

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O LORD, You have searched me and known me. ² You know when I sit down and when I rise up; You understand my thought from afar. ³ You scrutinize my path and my lying down, And are intimately acquainted with all my ways. ⁴ Even before there is a word on my tongue, Behold, O LORD, You know it all. ⁵ You have enclosed me behind and before, And laid Your hand upon me. ⁶ Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; It is too high, I cannot attain to 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, behold, You are there. ⁹ If I take the wings of the dawn, If I dwell in the remotest part of the sea, ¹⁰ Even there Your hand will lead me, And Your right hand will lay hold of me. ¹¹ If I say, "Surely the darkness will overwhelm me, And the light around me will be night," ¹² Even the darkness is not dark to You, And the night is as bright as the day. Darkness and light are alike to You. ¹³ For You formed my inward parts; You wove me in my mother's womb. ¹⁴ I will give thanks to You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Wonderful are Your works, And my soul knows it very well. ¹⁵ My frame was not hidden from You, When I was made in secret, And skillfully wrought in the depths of the earth; ¹⁶ Your eyes have seen my unformed substance; And in Your book were all written The days that were ordained for me, When as yet there was not one of them. ¹⁷ How precious also are Your thoughts to me, O God! How vast is the sum of them! ¹⁸ If I should count them, they would outnumber the sand. When I awake, I am still with You. ¹⁹ O that You would slay the wicked, O God; Depart from me, therefore, men of bloodshed. ²⁰ For they speak against You wickedly, And Your enemies take Your name in vain. ²¹ Do I not hate those who hate You, O LORD? And do I not loathe those who rise up against You? ²² I hate them with the utmost hatred; They have become my enemies. ²³ Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me and know my anxious thoughts; ²⁴ And see if there be any hurtful way in me, And lead me in the everlasting way.

We've been looking at *Songs of the Spirit* – how God the Spirit forms and *transforms* the character of the believer and *does so*, in part, *using this core of the Bible, the poetic summary of the Old Testament, The Book of Psalms...* God takes us here to show us how to pray. We learn to relate to God; we learn the vocabulary of the soul in *The Book of Psalms*. And within the Psalms we find these rhythms or seasons of the inner life.

Last time, we looked at the season of waiting...*and today at the season of trembling*. When we meet God...not just our idea of God or a theory or some projection of the self... but when we actually have a brush with "The God Who Is There" (Schaeffer) *that*

is always an encounter with the transcendent. He's above us and as we'll see, infinitely above us ("the infinite, eternal and unchangeable Spirit") and that's frightening.

I know we usually define the "fear of the Lord" or the "fear of God" as being synonymous with awe or wonder or trust... but there is an element of just plain... fear. When we stand before the ocean or a massive rock-formation or a wild animal or the Grand Canyon...or we go into the sky in a jet... there's a feeling of fear...even terror. And when we come into contact with the Maker of all these things, it only makes sense that we are awe-struck and afraid... even terrified.

We also know that this "fear of the Lord" CAN go wrong: it can be absent in those who don't recognize anything but the natural/phenomenal world (the observable, measurable)...or it can be dismissed as if God were a kind of superman or a heavenly Santa Claus figure ("the man upstairs", *really another form of atheism and worse*) OR it can become a kind of phobia... where a person lives a cowering, warped life that's twisted by anxiety and absent of joy. AND ...where our tendency...is to seek a kind of bland balance between those extremes, what we really need is a third-way...*a transformation of trembling.*

Let's look at this 139th Psalm: 1) Trembling Explored 2) Trembling Transformed and 3) How You Can Know That the Transformation Has Occurred In YOU

When you read these prayers and meditations in the Psalms, and in the larger Bible (OT and NT) you find people trembling before God for a number of reasons. Sometimes it's because He is Creator and the writers see the vastness of His work and it makes them tremble – e.g. *"they that go down to the sea in ships and do business in great waters – THEY see the works of our God and his wonders in the deep!"* (107.23). "Who has measured the waters in the hollow of His hand, and marked off the heavens by the span, and calculated the dust of the earth by the measure, and weighed the mountains in a balance and the hills in a pair of scales?" (Isa 40.12) "What is man?" (Ps. 8)

And sometimes, it's because they acknowledge His providence – the way He governs all things and the way He orders their lives. In the Psalms, it's quite often the presence of enemies: God is using these opponents and evil, violent, corrupt people to help me see how powerless I am. God could stop them but He doesn't ... or God could stop this storm or this sickness or war... but He doesn't. *There are just some things that get our attention and even atheists find themselves praying before the God IN whom they have refused to believe...at least up to now.*

And the holiness of God – when sinful people in the Bible and outside of the Bible, when we encounter the moral perfection of God and see ourselves as messed up and selfish and corrupt – *it makes us tremble*. “If You, LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?” (130.3) *Psalm 38*, “A raging fever burns within me, and my health is broken. I am exhausted and completely crushed.” (v.7-8 NLT). A very influential theologian of the 20th C Rudolf Otto wrote of the idea of God’s holiness, and I think he coined the phrase, “*Mysterium tremendum et fascinans*” – the mystery we find both terrifying and irresistible, like a moth to the flame.

Isaiah wrote of his encounter with God’s holiness, “Then I said, ‘Woe is me – I’m ruined! Because I’m a man of unclean lips, living among people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts.’” (Isa 6.5)

And yet IN this particular Psalm... it’s one specific aspect of God that makes the writer, King David, take note ...and ABOUT which He trembles and reflects. It’s God’s complete knowledge of our lives and our thoughts and everything about us.

He uses 6 Hebrew verbs in the first few verses to make himself linger on this idea – that he is known inside and out by God. “You know...You understand ... scrutinize... intimately acquainted” ... and more.

Then he triple trembles in v. 6, “such knowledge is too wonderful...too high...unattainable...” The writing is poetic repetition because that’s the kind of writing that’s needed for this kind of reflection.

Then two questions...like we often find when people are trembling before God... “What is man” (Ps 8)... “O LORD, who can stand before your holiness?” (130) and here in this Psalm, “Where can I go from Your Spirit? And where can I flee from Your presence?”

It’s as if... he’s feeling exposed...as if he’s sees that there really is NO SUCH THING AS PRIVACY... He’s never alone and he is never in secret but that the watching eye of God sees him and knows him (6 verbs!) and the searing Eye looks into his very heart and motives... Where can he go to hide?...Nowhere!

He reflects on the things that have fascinated our own modern physicists: space, light and time. Space: if I go up to heaven or down to the grave or East toward the sunrise or

West to the sea – space will not hide me from the watching Eye... “Behold, You are there?”

Space and LIGHT – light and dark are alike to YOU. I can not hide in the shadows or blind You with a flash – YOU always know everything about me!

Space – light and TIME – in the past, when my cells were coming together in my mother’s womb... it makes me tremble to think of it... parts of the body that are still in the 21st Century a mystery...YOU O LORD were weaving me together...fearfully and wonderfully made...according to some larger plan.

And in the future – YOU have ordained ALL MY DAYS ...for a FUTURE that YOU ALONE had established and determined and ordained... NOTHING is left to chance. There is NO SUCH THING AS CHANCE.

And now to the psychological complexity of being known at a level in which I don’t even know myself (why I DO what I do...motive I don’t understand which YOU O LORD...know completely!) to this psychological complexity is added this PHILOSOPHICAL conundrum... the God who leaves nothing to chance... but ordains all things according to the counsel of His own will...

And suddenly we find ourselves in what someone has called “cosmic claustrophobia” – John Calvin warned, “Don’t wander too far in to this...you may leave the labyrinth but may leave without your sanity!”

And yet, somehow...as with the American philosopher, Jonathan Edwards... this trembling and the trauma of being seen and known and scrutinized by the God who governs every molecule of the universe...somehow to both Edwards AND David, this became NOT a horrifying thought...nor even a barely tolerable doctrine... but the source of greatest comfort and a TREASURE that buoyed them and kept them afloat in the most dire and dreadful situations.

Edwards said, “Absolute sovereignty is what I love to ascribe to God. But my first conviction was not so.” And David wrote, “How precious are Your thoughts to me, O God...how altogether priceless and valuable beyond description is it to know that YOU think of me and know me and govern the vast universe and my puny life with such precision...it makes me tremble with JOY!”

How did it happen? What transforms trembling so that it's not some trite "Oh yeah...I'm good with God... no problem" and NOT, "I'm trapped by the cosmic puppet-master and I live cringing and paralyzed with terror"? The transformation takes place as David considers the Covenant Keeping God.

God would not give David what he deserved... God would know all about David's sin... (and if you know David's story, you know there was no shortage of sin!) and God would attribute David's sin to David's Ancestor...to the "Son of David", Jesus Christ.

"O, that You would slay the wicked, O God" prays David. And God says, "then I would have to slay YOU! And I see all your motives and I alone know that YOU deserve justice...put I will but another in your place...I WILL SLAY HIM in order to save YOU."

When David sees that and knows that...reflects on it deeply even poetically...and when Jonathan Edwards and when the Christian... when we bring it into our heart that this God is NOT some far off distant puppet master but is keenly aware of our suffering and INTIMATELY acquainted with our grief (Isa 53.3) that transforms trembling from fear to freedom.

Well, did David KNOW all that about Jesus Christ and His atoning sacrifice on the cross? No...he only knew and trusted the God of redemption even though he didn't know how redemption would be accomplished...But we do...and Edwards did. And when we see it, then we no longer feel hemmed in and trapped...INSTEAD we feel cherished and deeply loved and known.

If you see Jesus Christ, slain for the wicked, slain in your place, God actually absorbing the blame and satisfying justice IN YOUR PLACE... it makes you tremble with joy. It becomes something you want to meditate on and treasure and delight in. It doesn't start that way...it didn't for David in this Psalm OR for Edwards but through the lens of the Cross you see an all-knowing God, who sees the very worst things about you and who is willing to put His very heart on the line in order to have you – to redeem you, make you guilt-free and cover you with the record of Jesus Christ's perfect life.

Now, how do you know if this transformation has taken place in your view of God and of yourself and the world – the transformation of fear/trembling?

A few things to look for: 1) If you think of God as "the man upstairs" or speak of Him that way, unless you're a brand new believer, you probably don't get it. It's NOT that you stop fearing God and He becomes your "good buddy" (That's not the

transformation of trembling – it's the absence of it). People who really know the sea don't get familiar and sloppy with the sea...they have a growing respect...and awe...a delight that is a "serious joy" not a silly thing.

You'll want justice...equity...fairness... for the ills of this world ... AND those ills that may have NO direct impact on your life but only affect the lives of others – those wrongs become revolting to you. David hated this stuff and saw it all as arising from a wrong conception of God. (Those who have empty thoughts of God – not weighty/true thoughts). V. 20 "For they speak against You wickedly, and Your enemies take Your name in vain." David saw that *messed up ideas about God* lead to injustice...and violence.

3) David was also self-doubting...self-suspicious... and right after praying against the bad guys... he returns to asks, "Lord, if I'm not being a lover of justice and goodness...If I'm being self-righteous and hypocritical... *"Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my anxious thoughts; and see if there be any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way."* It's exactly how the Psalm began: "search and know". He trusts God and he invites God to get to the bottom of his life and remake him. He delights in being known by God.

Last: look for and cultivate a rediscovery of discovery David is a ponderer...a contemplator and he recognizes wonder and astonishment...childlike amazement with the number of grains of sand... and light/time/space... a child in the womb...poetry.

I know we've seen everything on YouTube but we have to return to appreciating simple things like insects and sunsets and the shape of leaves and mystery all around us ("I will give thanks to you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made" and we have to see it... God will give us new eyes). *People who undergo this transformation gain an understanding and gratitude/appreciation that we are more complex and ...wondrous...than we think...* But also...more messed up: layers of motives that only God knows. As we look at Jesus Christ, the Spirit works into the believer a trust and *a will* to invite God in deeper and deeper into the onion.