

# Creation Psalms

## Psalm 139 – Fearfully and Wonderfully Made

### For your reflection

Think of a time when you tried to hide from God’s attention. Why was that? How did you go about hiding? Were you successful?

Read Psalm 13. In this psalm, God seems absent; the psalmist feels forgotten by God and longs for the attention that Psalm 139 seems to find oppressive. Both psalms are attributed to David. Do you identify with the different seasons in David’s relationship with God, as reflected in these two psalms? Which psalm resonates with your experience of God at the moment? Where would you place yourself on a line between the two psalms?

This psalm’s heading says it was written by David. Can you think of a time in David’s life when he might have written this psalm? If not, what kind of circumstances in someone’s life might inspire a prayer like this?

How would you feel about reading this psalm with someone with terminal cancer, or a degenerative illness like multiple sclerosis? If that’s you, how does the psalm make you feel about your body?

### My Reflection

When I was working on these psalms during my sabbatical, this was the one that felt like the last piece in the jigsaw. I had reflected on different aspects of creation, but there was something missing, and that something was me. I found it the hardest psalm to work through, perhaps because I couldn’t think in abstract terms at all when it came to my bodily self as a created being. It took two separate weeks of solo camping in some woods in Devon to explore my sense of creatureliness, and I know that I have much more learning yet to do before I feel entirely at home in my body – until I can really echo those words of the psalm – “I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made” (v.14a).

At a first glance, this psalm seems remarkably introspective. But while the psalm begins with an examination of the psalmist, it is God who is doing the looking. In vv.1-4, God knows every action, word and thought of the psalmist. According to Alter, the word in v.3 translated in the NRSV as “lying down” is usually used for an

animal's lair: a place of hiding and safety. It's interesting that the psalm compares a person's bed with an animal's den. But, however cunningly concealed, God sees in. Verses 5-6 could be read as finding this all-seeing God oppressive. The NRSV reads, "You hem me in", and the Grail psalm uses the word "besieged". Verses 7-12 could support such a reading, with words like "flee" (v.7) and "cover" (v.11). However, Alter suggests an alternative sense of clay in the hands of a potter: "From behind and in front you shaped me, and you set your palm upon me." This reading would be supported by vv.13-16. Perhaps it depends on whether you think God is out to get you or to bless you, and that may depend on what you've been doing, or it may just boil down to your basic image of what God is like. I wonder if it's possible to hold both readings together: we cannot escape or hide from God's attention, but God's intention is for good for God's creation, of which we are each a part.

Verses 7-12 explore the inescapability of God's attention. There is nowhere you can go to flee from God's presence: not in heaven nor in the grave (v.8); not if you ride with the sun across the sky from east to west (v.9); not even darkness can cover you (vv.11-12). It seems to me that v.10 is caring rather than fearful: God will lead me and hold me fast, even at the farthest limits of the sea (as the prophet Jonah discovered). There is more in these verses than the idea of God seeing these distant hiding places. God is there, even in the grave (v.8). God is not just keeping a watchful eye on every part of creation. God doesn't just see, passively: God searches. God is present and actively engaged, everywhere, without exception. God is greater than creation, God's thoughts are beyond number (vv.17-18) and God's knowledge is too high for any to attain (v.6), and yet God is present within even the darkest recesses of the universe, and is even interested in me.

The psalmist credits God with their formation in their mother's womb (v.13), forming even their "inward parts" (literally, kidneys). Verse 14 praises God for this specific act and also for all God's works. The psalmist's sense of being "fearfully and wonderfully made" is not a sense of exclusivity or privilege. In acknowledging that "wonderful are your works" (NRSV; the Grail marvels at "the wonders of all your creation"), the psalmist expresses praise and awe that all beings owe their creation and existence to God. I am fearfully and wonderfully made. So are you. So is a rabbit. So is a woodlouse. So is a birch tree. So is a slug. So is a nettle. Every being is wonderfully made. The location of the psalmist's formation in these verses moves between their mother's womb in v.13 and "the depths of the earth" in v.15. Perhaps this recalls Genesis 2 where God forms animals and people from the mud of the earth. It may recall the grave ("Sheol") of v.8. This parallel

between womb and depths of the earth may be significant in understanding our origin theologically, remembering that we are mud people, people of the earth, made from the stuff of earth and yet (ideally) conceived in love and nurtured in love. God is engaged in those biological and emotional processes of fertilization, shaping and nurturing, even in the secret darkness of the womb, the psalmist's "unformed substance" in v.16 recalling the primordial formlessness of creation in Genesis 1.2. I may be fearfully and wonderfully made, but that is grounds for thankfulness rather than pride as I take my place alongside each other one of God's wonderful works. All living beings on this planet share one mother Earth and one mother God. But that is not to deny the biological processes that bring each living thing into being. The language of vv.13-16 moves from active formation in vv.13-14 to a more passive voice in vv.15-16, where God sees David<sup>1</sup> as he "was being made" and God's active involvement is at best ambiguously stated. I think that these verses can encompass a biological understanding and a theological interpretation of our origins.

Thinking in the way just outlined might help deal with the problem of saying, in our day, "God made me." Quite possibly the ancient people out of whom this psalm comes to us were not so naïve as to think each person was simply formed by God like a clay model. They must have been aware of inherited physical traits and known something of biological processes. Still, I think we need to find a way of being true to what we know scientifically and what we affirm theologically, without kludges. The theological affirmation of this psalm, that I am fearfully and wonderfully made by God, needs to be articulated carefully, but there is a real need for it to be articulated in a culture that seems obsessed with body image to the detriment of so many people. Most of us do not have 'perfect' bodies. We do not match the ideals of the fashion or pornography industries. As we get older, our bodies suffer the effects of wear and of illness, perhaps bearing scars or missing body parts through surgery or accident. Some of us have a disability or a

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<sup>1</sup> I have tried to avoid over-use of the male pronoun, but in such a personal psalm, it's hard to do completely. I apologise for any difficulties this causes. The psalm's heading names David as the author. These ascriptions are ancient enough to be part of the biblical text in Hebrew. However, they may or may not reflect the psalm's true authorship, and normally I'm inclined to treat them with suspicion as later insertions. But, for the sake of making this reflection read more flowingly, when I found it particularly hard to avoid a singular personal pronoun, I've run with the ascription's assumption and referred to David, the male pronoun therefore being appropriate. This seemed better than appearing to assume that an anonymous psalmist was male. Generally speaking, I suspect that the work of a number of female writers is included in the bible, and I try not to assume that all anonymous and pseudonymous texts are the work of men.

chronic illness, sometimes with a genetic cause. We may have reason to keep our mouth shut at v.14 of this psalm. We do not feel fearfully and wonderfully made, and if God made us so, we may be more inclined to turn away and hide from God than to praise God.

Yet we are embodied beings. There is no body-soul dualism in Hebrew thought (and if you want talk about Christian thought, just remember the scarred body of the risen Jesus). When David talks about himself, it is as a whole being: body, soul, mind, spirit – everything as one, without distinction. We need to find the language, including the emotional language, to feel at home in our bodies as they are. We need to be able to embrace the earth in us and ground ourselves in the physical stuff of which we are made. We need to go beyond this, not just feeling at home in our bodies but rejoicing in them, with a sense of awe and gratitude. We are diminished if we are ashamed of our bodies. If we do not appreciate our physical being, we will be limited in the appreciation we can give to others as they are, whether human or not, and we will be limited in our worship of God. If we are ungrateful and critical of our bodies, we are likely to judge others for their imperfections while idolizing and coveting the bodies of those we admire, neither of which are healthy or godly attitudes. I need to find a way of inhabiting my ageing, scarred, imperfect body, and doing so with gratitude and joy.

It is possible that the psalmist is thinking along these lines, or at least it is possible to read the psalm in this way. Perhaps the psalmist wants to hide from God not because of a sense of sinfulness but through a general sense of shame, perhaps shame in their body. But God will see into every possible hiding place. God sees into every secret place and even thick darkness is no cover. What makes this a source of salvation is the idea that God even saw David in embryonic form in his mother's womb, and not only saw him, but brooded over that formless lump of cells there in the watery darkness and wove him together as a new creation, as a living person. This God, who tenderly nurtured him into being, maps out a path of wonderful possibility for him into an as-yet non-existent future, and then watches over his every step as possibility becomes reality (or not), always searching him out and searching out his path, laying a gentle divine and parental hand upon him to lead him. David is not perfect, but is nonetheless fearfully and wonderfully made. He is not a mistake, nor a lesser being. In God's creation there are no lesser beings. There are only wonderful beings, each one seen and known and loved by its Creator. In the light of God, David has nothing to prove, and any pretence to be anything other than what he is would be pointless before the God who sees and knows all. He can rest, content, in the knowledge that he is fearfully and

wonderfully made by One whose knowledge and thoughts are immeasurably vast and wonderful.

Verses 19-22 suddenly jar the gentle mood. So many psalms seem to be spoiled by this kind of vicious, judgmental ending. I think there are two clues in the closing section of the psalm that mitigate its violence, at least to an extent. Firstly, in the parallelism of v.19, “the wicked” of the first half-verse are paralleled with “the blood-thirsty” in the second half. These are not just general sinners but killers and maimers, those who belittle the fearfully and wonderfully made creations of God. They are especially wicked because they have acted out their violence in the name of God. Those of us who act in the name of God need to be especially careful, lest we claim the name of God to belittle, degrade, exclude or oppress anyone because of the colour of their skin, or their gender, or their sexuality, or their disability, or their illness or any other way of describing them being who they are. Every living being is fearfully and wonderfully made and as such warrants respect and care, so this basic idea is a big challenge to our attitudes towards animals and plants, as well as our attitude towards humans. David wishes to uphold his belief in the created dignity of every being, even if perhaps he goes too far in the way he expresses it. He does, however, seem to realize that those attitudes of hubris, pride, pretence, shame and other fruits of the ego – the things that can lead someone to act hurtfully towards others – these things are within him and so he is in danger. Therefore, in the last two verses (23, 24), David asks God to search him, know him, test him, see if there is any hurtful way in him, and lead him in the eternal way. These are the same words that were used at the beginning of the psalm, where God does these things anyway. At the end, the act of invitation is an act of relationship. It is an act of humility and honesty. David now welcomes God’s presence and God’s attention and willingly places himself under God’s watch and care.

Placing ourselves willingly under God’s watch and care is how we begin the process of becoming who we truly are. That welcome of God’s all-seeing knowledge of us opens the way for the Holy Spirit to begin stripping us of all pretence, of all self-aggrandizement, of pride, of selfish ambition, as well as of shame and guilt. The choice to be naked, as it were, before the God who formed us in the beginning and has watched over our path ever since, is a choice to welcome the transforming work of God’s continuing formation of us, to be fearfully and wonderfully the unique embodied being each of us is made to be. We are limited and imperfect, but we exist in relation to a God without limit, and in God’s perfect and limitless love, we can learn to inhabit our wonderfully-made true selves with joy and grace.

## Ideas For Praying With Psalm 139

### Outdoors

Do something to heighten your senses. For example:

- Dance in the rain.
- Go for a swim or paddle in a stream, river, or sea (safely!)
- Expose as much skin as modesty (or the law) permits and stand facing into the wind.
- Take a barefoot walk, for example on a mown lawn or a sandy beach.

Pay attention to your skin and the sensations you feel. Talk to God about how you feel about your body, and how God feels about it. Give thanks for your body, being as specific as you can.

### Indoors

Do the skin-awareness exercise from the Outdoor section above, but having a lovely soak in a bubble bath. Or, if that feels too extravagant, soak your feet in a bowl of nice warm water, perhaps getting together with a friend to exchange foot massages too.

Which parts of your body are wonderful and which are less so? Which would you like to carry into the resurrection, and which would you like to swap, discard or mend if you could? What consequences of wear and tear and illness would you like to undo, bearing in mind that you would have to undo the underlying events and experiences as if they never happened? Talk to Jesus about your body and your life. Ask him to guide you into acceptance or into healing.

If you have experienced serious illness, surgery or disability, or can pray with someone who has:

Read Daniel 7.9, Luke 2.21 and John 20.20. Talk to Jesus about his scars and yours (physical, mental, emotional). Tell him how you feel and what you'd like to ask him, and spend time listening for his answer.

## Prayers

### The Wings of the Morning

Where would I go?  
You search me out.  
You search my heart.  
You see my thoughts.  
You know me.

Where would I go?  
No dark is too dark.  
No far away is too far –  
or away.  
You formed me in the dark,  
in the secret depths.  
You know me.

Where would I go?  
I would take the wings of the morning.  
I would rise with the sun and soar across the sky.  
I would wheel and turn with starlings.  
I would glide with gulls.  
I would leap with dolphins.  
I would bend time and space and  
fly to the farthest beyond –  
and back.  
I would be as free as free can be,  
fearfully and wonderfully.  
And you would be with me,  
soaring, turning, leaping, rising  
on the wings of the morning.

Where would I go?  
I would go with you.  
You know me.

## Collect

God of Creation,  
who has made all things wonderful;  
may we be so filled with wonder at all your works,  
that we give to ourselves and every creature  
the same attentiveness, reverence and care  
that we receive from your loving hand,  
through our Saviour, Jesus Christ,  
Amen.