

“God Embraces you ... embrace God!”

During our life time, there are particular moments that stick with us forever. Be they ... a one time experience ... or certain spoken words in a unique context ... or perhaps an important event ... some how they become engrained in our head and heart and soul to the point that they affect the way we think or what we believe to be true. I guess it's been about 20 years ago when I visited a friend, who was a minister and whose 30 year old son had undergone a 14 hour operation at N.I H. for a serious illness, as well as months of therapy. I remember distinctly what he said to me after he explained the family's ordeal: *At times like this, I am glad I don't have to go to God as a stranger.*

I remember his words because they were a great witness of faith to me. My friend's conviction that God is not a stranger was, indeed, for him ... his life of faith ... a faith not self-generated ... but a faith that was a response to God's approach with an offer that he or me or you can either accept or refuse. We have faith because God has come near to us and gifted us with such faith. And unless our response to God's grace withers from lack of nourishment or collapses under the weight of worldly pressures, the Lord remains near to us throughout the course of our life. God's nearness is sometimes portrayed as a watching eye that sees all ... knows all. This is what Psalm 139 attempts to communicate to us.

The 139th Psalm is one of the greatest poetic passages of scripture. Psalm 139 is a prayer that affirms and analyzes God's perfect knowledge of the individual. Psalm 139 is a prayer that describes God's constant presences and involvement with each created soul ... a prayer that expresses the psalmist's consequent impatience with those who distrust and disobey God. It is a prayer that renews the psalmist's own submission to God's searching and direction, and far-reaching conviction. God's intimate knowledge of us, for example, is precisely that of a close friend and companion who deeply understands our emotions and motives ... who knows the details of our routine and whereabouts ... who reads our processes of thought ... who sympathizes with our eager pursuits and all our habitual ways.

God's intimacy with us is like a friend who anticipates what we are going to say ... a friend who supports us from long-past loyalty, yet encourages us to move forward ... God's intimacy with us is like a friend who, at times lays their hands on our shoulders to either sustain us or to check us. Such companionship is too constant and too deep for superficial comprehension. Such a friend is --- GOD! The whole Bible contains no finer prayer or poem than Psalm 139's thoughts on "walking with God." God is present in all extremes: of height and of depth ... of east and of west ... of darkness and of light. The Psalmist experiences God everywhere, but this "everywhere relationship" is fully personal. The Psalmist is "beset by God" ... that is to say that the Psalmist senses that he surrounded by God is every aspect of his life ... which inspires him to rejoice in this fact of grace.

Listen closely to this contemporary rendering of the Psalm: *O God, You know me inside and out, through and through. Everything I do, every thought that flits through my mind, every step I take, every plan I make, every word I speak, You know, even before these things happen. You know my past. You know my future. Your circumventing presence covers my every move. Your knowledge of me sometimes comforts me, sometimes frightens me; But always it is far beyond my comprehension. There is no way to escape You, no place to hide. If I ascend to the heights of joy, You are there before me. If I am plunged into the depths of despair, You are there to meet me. I could fly to the other side of our world and find You there to lead the way. I could walk into the darkest of nights, only to find You there to lighten its dismal hours ... May, O God, Your all-knowing, everywhere-present Spirit continue to search out my feelings and thoughts. Deliver me from that which may hurt or destroy me, and guide me along the paths of love and truth.*

Psalm 139 is complementary to other Psalms. For instance Psalm 5 reads: *Listen to my words, O Lord, consider my inmost thoughts; heed my cry for help, my king and my God. In the morning, when I say my prayers, thou wilt hear me. I set out my morning sacrifices and watch for thee, O Lord.* The emphasis is on the discipline of devotion ... starting out each new day with a simple, straight forward prayer: "O Lord, I need you" ... beginning each day by making ourselves available to God. Ah, but now we hear from Psalm 139 that God has already made Himself available to us. God is present in our life ... always waiting. God may be distant from our thoughts, but God is not distant from our life! By our lack of devotional discipline ... we may fail to be awoken to God's presence, but that does not negate the fact that God is near to us.

Verse 5 says so: "You hem or fence me in, behind and before." That means that God surrounds us. Writes one

commentator: *There You are, Lord, in front of me and behind me in space, as well as before me in time, and after me also, after I experience this moment and then can look back upon it. I cannot put back the clock to escape You, or put it forward to an unthinkable future. But apart from 'before' and 'after', at this moment Your hand lies on my head in blessing. I have discovered that I am fenced in by You, fenced in by Your love.*

Wow! What a marvelous thought ... to think that God's presence is always with us ... blessing us ... even though we may not be aware! There is a story told about the famous preacher Charles Spurgeon, who noticed one day a weather vane on the roof of a farm building which bore the phrase "God is Love." Spurgeon asked the farmer, "Do you think God's love is as changeable as that weather vane?" Replied the farmer, "Sir, you miss the point! It is on the weather vane because no matter which way the wind is blowing, God is still love!"

This is a graphic illustration of God's presence in your life. No matter where you are, physically, emotionally, spiritually, God is present in your life. For this reason you are able to turn to God anytime, in any situation, and God, like the father of the prodigal son, welcomes you with open arms ... ah, even more ... as you turn, God comes running to greet you! This is why you feel God's presences during moments of reaching toward Him. Because ... as you reach ... God's arms are already outstretched!

There is a familiar story told about the author and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel ... a story that affirms the wisdom of Psalm 139. Dr. Wiesel was speaking at a university about the Holocaust, when a student asked him: "Mr. Wiesel, ten years ago you said you hated God; now you are saying that you love God. Isn't that dishonest, or at least inconsistent?" Wiesel replied: "Ten years ago, I hated God. Now I love God. But I was never **without** God!"

When we come into a complete realization that we are "beset" by God, (*beset means surround or hemmed in*) then no longer are we consciously able to declare that we are the masters of our fate ... the captain of our souls. When you have difficulty believing that God exists, or cares, or is present ... read Psalm 139 and let it remind you that whether you believe or not ... does not change the fact that God is near. You see, we are the ones who move away from God ... not God from us! When we have difficulty seeing God's active presence in this world amid the chaos and violence, and suffering remember the words of the Psalmist: "... if I make my bed in Sheol (hell), You are there." Even though this world may sink to the utter depths of the darkest of dark ... God is there!

God goes where His children go ... and there ... God waits patiently for them to turn and take His hand. God goes where you go ... even though your life may sink deep into despair ... even in the realms of darkness ... the night is bright as the day ... for darkness is as light with God. How can this be so? The answer is, of course, that God is light, and in God is no darkness at all. This is to say, God can make use of evil as His tool, and bring forth good even out of chaos. Consequently, the Psalmist can write this truth, because he lived in the hellishness of an exiled life in Babylon. But he is completely confident that God can make use of one's own private hell at anytime to lead them out into God's marvelous light.

A World War I story has a soldier saying to his captain, "Where is God?" There they were in the middle of the tangled barbed wire and the muddy foxholes. People were fighting and snarling like animals in that trench warfare, and that soldier looked into the face of his captain and said, "Would you tell me, sir, where is God in all of this?" And the captain looked across "no man's land" through the mud and barbed wire, and saw a courageous medic rushing with companion to aid a wounded soldier who was groaning in pain. The captain said to the soldier, "There ... there goes God ... there he is ... don't you see Him?"

This same poignant question can be asked of you: "Don't you see Him? Don't you see God in your life? Don't you see God surrounding you in every aspect? True, you may have a difficult time seeing, or believing, but it is your eye sight ... your doubt that is the problem ... not God's. Always God surrounds you. Always you are "beset" by God. Always, you are hemmed in by God's presence.

Another wonderful image that I like to think of is: "You are encircled by the arms of the mystery of God." God embraces you, always. God hugs you, because you are huggable. And so I implore you ... allow yourself to be hugged by God ... and in return, with your complete body, mind, heart, and soul ... embrace God!