

The Covenant of the Heart

The genius of this psalmist extends to his insight that what happens in a person's heart is the key to having, or not having, a genuinely close relationship with God:

“Search me and know my heart, test me and know my thoughts”

This great insight also guides us in how **we** should relate to **others**.

First, if you get worried when others appear not to like you, if you get hurt when others misjudge you, or if you get upset at the way others treat you, then realise that **it does not matter**. At the end of the day, although we all want people to like us and to think well of us, **it does not really matter** if they do not.

The only important thing is to bear in mind that **God does know your heart**. That is what really matters - so, peace and comfort should come to you from that truth if your heart is genuinely pure.

Second, our hearts must never become hard. It is easy to let our negative feelings, especially anger, resentment and jealousy, make our hearts bitter, and begin the process of changing them into stone. In addition, neither must we be hypocrites - God always knows.

Third, we must treat others as we would like to be treated ourselves (the Golden Rule Mtt.7) or, better still, apply the so-called Platinum Rule to treat others **better** than we would like to be treated ourselves. To do this, as well as pleading the prayer of psalm 51:

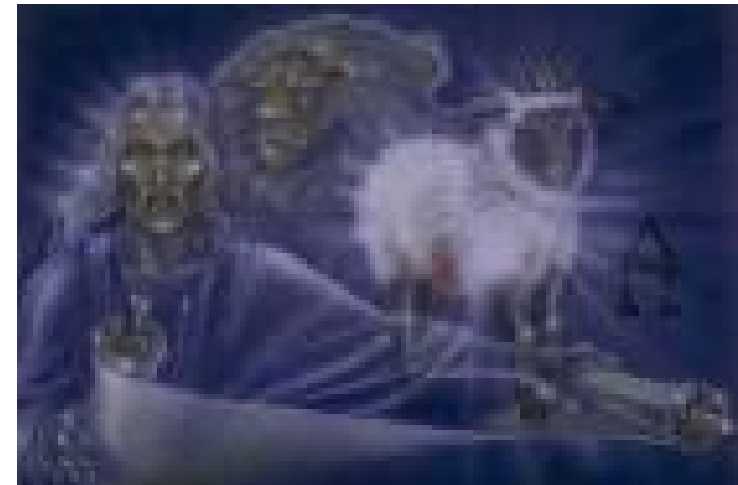
“a pure heart create for me, O God, put a steadfast spirit in me”

we must apply the wisdom of the present psalmist in his realisation that we can do nothing good without God himself guiding us.

“See that I follow not the wrong path, and lead me in the path of life eternal”. How the final few words are translated is crucial. If as ‘life eternal’ then the psalmist has provided an insight on the afterlife unique in the Old Testament. However, if it is ‘the path everlasting’ then the reference is instead to the only true way to find God.

Our Catholic Faith Prayer and Spirituality 2010-2011

11. Psalm 139 - God Knows Everyone's Inner Heart and Judges Accordingly



1. Is it right for the psalmist to pray for the death of evil people or for him to express his hatred of God's enemies?
2. What is your reaction to the psalmist's view that God has pre-ordained our lives?
3. Is it realistic to expect us to be immune to negative, unjustified criticism of our character or behaviour?

The Unique Nature of Psalm 139

This psalm can not be included in any of the traditional categories of psalms (Hymns, Wisdom, Petitions, Thanksgiving, Royal/Kingly/Messianic, Liturgical/Public Worship). It is a psalm of late composition compared with most other psalms in the Psalter, and may be termed a **personal philosophy**.



Its main emphasis is on the **omniscience** of God, but framed in terms of the psalmist's reflection on his own life. At the end of the psalm, he makes a petition not for earthly benefits but for **spiritual wisdom**, a petition based on a theology of the **'Covenant of the Heart'**.

A strange feature of the psalm is the inclusion of a section that is out of place in the context of the rest of the psalm. In addition, the content of this section is quite shocking, asking God to kill the wicked:

"If only, God, you would kill the wicked"

with the psalmist stating his own deep hatred of those who hate God.

"God, do I not hate those who hate you .. My hate for them has no limits, I regard them as my own enemies"

These insertions are similar to the content of the so-called 'Cursing Psalms' (Ps.69:22f, 109, 137:7f), and it is interesting that they are not included in the Divine Office recitation of this psalm.

The Omniscience of God

The psalmist's recognition of God's omniscience is expressed both in implied praise of his majesty and recognition of his awesome power:

"You know my resting and my rising, you discern my purpose from afar, you mark when I walk or lie down. All my ways lie open to you .. Where can I go from your spirit or where can I flee from your face? If I climb the heavens you are there"

But God's power is also recognised in his creative acts - the creation of the psalmist himself, and the whole of creation:

"It was you who created my being, knit me together in my mother's womb. I thank you for the wonder of my being, for the wonders of all your creation"



We should note that here we have an ancient realisation that life commences in the womb from the moment of conception.

Yet, God's omniscience goes beyond creation and his knowledge of what actually happens to cover what has **yet** to happen, a knowledge beyond our comprehension:

"Before ever a word is on my tongue you know it, O Lord, through and through .. too wonderful this knowledge, too high, beyond my reach"

Our Actions Predestined?

But the reflection, philosophy and wisdom of the psalmist goes even further - he anticipates the theology of predestination by depicting God pre-ordaining all the psalmist's actions:

"Already you knew my soul, my body held no secret from you when I was being fashioned in secret .. Your eyes saw all my actions, they were all of them written in your book, every one of my days was decreed BEFORE any of them came into being"

Although he has come to this incredible conclusion, the psalmist does not understand it:

"To me how mysterious your thoughts"

