

Self-worth is not a human achievement but a divine gift. We are made in the image of God, which means we are made for communion and community, for rational reflection and righteous obedience, for worship and work. We are called into a personal, face-to-face relationship with God and with one another. We have a soul because God created us with a soul. This means that I am not my own, that which is most dearly “Me” is not mine. The genesis of soul-making lies not in our ourselves but in our Creator and Lord. The me-centered world of our own making is nothing but myth. Reality is the God-centered world of creation and eternity.

Jesus made this clear: the value of the soul is beyond our means. Many people have told us that we don't have a soul, but only one person has said that we can't afford one. Only Jesus has said that my soul is so expensive that even if I gained the whole world I couldn't afford my very own soul. “What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?” (Matt 16:26). Who we are and to whom we belong is a critical issue, especially when it comes to relationships. How we see ourselves has a great impact on our friendships and commitments. Our self-understanding shapes our expectations of self-fulfillment.¹

Unselfing Self-Understanding

*You have searched me, Lord, and you know me.
You know when I sit and when I rise;
you perceive my thoughts from afar.
You discern my going out and my lying down;
you are familiar with all my ways.
Before a word is on my tongue
you, Lord, know it completely.*

*You hem me in—behind and before;
you have laid your hand on me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,
too lofty for me to attain.*

Psalm 139:1-6

Psalm 139 describes how God's parental love cares for us. The ground for all knowledge begins with this personal relationship: “O Lord, you have searched me and you know me.” Thomas Cranmer's memorable words echo this truth: “Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid. . .” “The Psalmist could have written, very simply, ‘Lord, Your knowledge of me is total.’ This brief statement would have said, in essence, what the first strophe of this psalm does say. . . Obviously he wants to dwell on the thought; he is not anxious to leave it. He wants the conviction to sink deeply into his soul that God knows him through and through, so he comes at the idea from a variety of angles and aspects — search and

¹ Webster, Soulcraft, 43.

know, sitting down and rising up and lying down, paths and ways, thoughts and words.”² Derek Kidner writes, “Any small thoughts that we may have of God are magnificently transcended by this psalm; yet for all of its height and depth it remains intensely personal from first to last.”³

Psalm 139 is filled with references to the first-person personal pronouns: *I*, *me* and *my*. The emphasis, however, is not on the self but on the Lord. The best way to avoid self-centeredness, as David knew so well, is to be God-centered. Instead of living according to the constant refrain “Me! Me! Me!” we enter into a hymn of praise and adoration: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come” (Rev 4:8). Everything about me becomes centered in the Lord Jesus Christ, my abilities and disabilities, my hopes and fears, my friends and enemies, my past and future, my daily tasks and long-range goals.

The psalmist takes comfort in the fact that God is all knowing (“You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways.”), God is ever-present (“You hem me in, behind and before; you have laid your hand on me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain.”), God is totally sovereign (“All the days ordained for me were in your book before one of them came to be”), and God is completely holy. The psalmist embraces this truth as a comfort but if we wish to hide from God we might perceive it as a threat (Gen 3:8).

Children focus on a *sensory world* that can be seen, heard, touched, smelled, and tasted. Most adults focus on a *sensible world* that calls for investigation, interpretation, reflection and action. Children are meant to grow up in an adult world where they are known, loved and cared for by adults. They need to be nursed, fed, protected and most of all, loved. *Their growth and maturity depends on being known better than they know. What is true for children is also true for adults.* Thankfully, we are known better than we know.

The apostle Paul said, “For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. *Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known*” (1 Cor 13:12). We are not alone and unknown, as many fear, but we are fully known and truly loved. The myth of the autonomous individual self spreads the lie that we are neither known nor loved. The myth contends that we are cosmic orphans adrift in a meaningless universe without identity and security. Knowledge is not an autonomous exercise. Life’s learning curve ought to lead to humility, not frustration. Wisdom is the ability to see ourselves from God’s perspective.

Puritan pastor Richard Baxter likened human beings separated from an understanding of God to “broken syllables.” “We know little of the creature,” wrote Baxter, “till we know it as it stands related to the Creator: single letters, and syllables uncomposed, are no better than nonsense. He who overlooks him who is the ‘Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end,’ and sees not him in all who is the All of all, does see nothing at all. All creatures, as such, are broken syllables; they signify nothing as separated from God.”⁴

² Patrick Henry Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, Chesterton, IN: Ancient Faith Publishing, 2011, 277.

³ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*. IVP, 1975, 463.

⁴ Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2007), pp. 56-57.

We cannot live as if we are the center of the universe without experiencing consequences. Daniel Yankelovich observes, “By concentrating day and night on your feelings, potentials, needs, wants and desires, and by learning to assert them more freely, you do not become a freer, more spontaneous, more creative self; you become a narrower, more self-centered, more isolated one. You do not grow you shrink.”⁵

Freud explains away the deep-seated emotion poured out in Psalm 139 and dismisses the reality of the all-knowing, all-loving, holy God. He claims in *The Future of an Illusion* (1928) that a parent-child relationship is responsible for the illusion of God.

When the growing individual finds that he is destined to remain a child forever, that he can never do without protection against strange superior powers, he lends those powers the features belonging to the figure of this father; he creates for himself the gods whom he dreads, whom he seeks to propitiate, and whom he nevertheless entrusts with his own protection. Thus, his longing for a father is identical with his need for protection against the consequences of human weakness.⁶

Christians believe just the opposite – that a parent-child relationship is at best but a faint, albeit tender, reflection of God’s abiding parental love. The choice is ours between a world of our making and the world of God’s creating. Either the Creator creates creation or creation invents a creator. In a multitude of practical ways we choose between being me-centered or God-centered.

Regardless of how brilliant the scientist or philosopher may be, to insist on a knowledge independent of God is like the stubborn two year old insisting on doing it himself. Or, as my granddaughter said this week, “Help me Mommy! I want to do it all by myself!” Self-understanding begins with an acknowledgment in the depth of our being that we are fully known by our Maker and Redeemer. We are invited into his fellowship which sustains and supports us. We are not cosmic orphans or the masters of the universe but we are the children of God.

The Physics of True Spirituality

*Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?
If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.
If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
if I settle on the far side of the sea,
even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.
If I say, ‘Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,’
even the darkness will not be dark to you;
the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.*

⁵ Yankelovich, *New Rules*, 239.

⁶ Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), 24.

Psalm 139:7-12

I cannot escape this relationship, nor do I want to. It is this relationship that defines me, secures me and understands me. Within it I am free to “rise on the wings of the dawn” or “settle on the far side of the sea” (139:9), but I am never independent from God’s guidance or protection. God is the answer to my inherent fears of anonymity and loneliness. We may no longer be scared of the dark, but we fear the dark night of the soul. Darkness is a metaphor for death and disaster. But even if “darkness crushes me” says the psalmist and the light all around me becomes night, the darkness isn’t dark and the night isn’t night to Yahweh; night will shine like daylight.⁷ The psalmist’s hope points forward to the true light that gives light to everyone. This is the light that shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it (John 1:5,9). Like his Lord, Rembrandt used a dark canvas to accentuate the light of Christ. “God is light; in him there is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5).

The Physicality of True Spirituality

*For you created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my mother’s womb.
I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful,
I know that full well.
My frame was not hidden from you
when I was made in the secret place.
When I was woven together in the depths of the earth,
your eyes saw my unformed body.
All the days ordained for me
were written in your book
before one of them came to be.
How precious to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!
If I were to count them,
they would outnumber the grains of sand –
when I awake, I am still with you.*

Psalm 139:13-18

This all-knowing, all-present God is the one responsible for my security – my redemption. The apostle’s bold declaration that nothing “will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:39) echoes this psalm. The Lord God knows me from the inside out, from top to bottom, and from beginning to end.⁸ I remember first being impressed with this psalm when our youngest child, Kennerly, was born. She was born on Wednesday, February 20, 1985, and on the following Sunday I preached on Psalm 139. More than most fathers I was

⁷ Waltke and Houston, *The Psalms*, 556. “The psalmist personifies the darkness: ‘will crush me’ is well known from Gen 3:15: ‘The Seed of the woman will crush/bruise your head, and the Serpent will crush/bruise his heel.’”

⁸ See Francis Thompson’s “The Hound of Heaven.”

humbled by her birth, even as I was humbled by God's previous provision in the adoption of our two sons. I had been told that due to surgery for cancer it was unlikely that I would be able to have children. In time, we pursued adoption and God wonderfully provided Jeremiah and Andrew for us. And then after ten years of marriage Virginia became pregnant with Kennerly. Each of our children has been a reminder of God's parental love and that we are his children.

There is nothing like the birth of a child to make a mockery of the belief in nature alone. I stood in the delivery room and held our seven-pound newborn, and I was overwhelmed by the sheer glory of her. In Psalm 8 David asks, "What is a man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?" He then answers his own question, "You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him/her with glory and honor" (Ps 8:4-5). The birth of a child causes us to re-examine the meaning of life, to contemplate God's sovereignty and to feel our dependence upon God. A child's dependence on human parents is so obvious; our dependence upon God so real. God's knowledge of me is complete. It is intimate, immediate, comprehensive, persistent and sovereign.

This stanza dovetails beautifully with the description of the body of Christ and the priesthood of all believers: *But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.* 1 Peter 2:9-10

David revels in the thoughts and blessings of God. "Your thoughts – how rare, how beautiful! God, I'll never comprehend them!" The psalmist cannot begin to tally up all the deeds and thoughts of God. The apostle Paul's doxology echoes David's praise: "Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! 'For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor? Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?' For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen" (Rom 11:33-36).

The Pressing Need for Divine Intervention

*If only you, God, would slay the wicked!
Away from me, you who are bloodthirsty!
They speak of you with evil intent;
your adversaries misuse your name.
Do I not hate those who hate you, Lord,
and abhor those who are in rebellion against you?
I have nothing but hatred for them;
I count them my enemies.*

Psalm 139:19-22

There is an abrupt change from intimacy with God to indignation against the wicked. Some find it hard to reconcile the psalmist's euphoria over the precious thoughts of God with such a

vehement attitude towards God's enemies. David pleads for divine intervention. Ethicist R. E. O White observed, "Doubtless the psalm would be more comfortable without verses 19-22. So would the world without evil men."⁹ The psalmist counts God's enemies as his own. Derek Kidner writes, "For all its vehemence, the hatred in this passage is not spite, but zeal for God. In 'the day of salvation' the New Testament will re-direct this fighting spirit, but it will endorse its single-mindedness ('What do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial?' (2 Cor 6:14-15))."¹⁰

Biblical realism runs through the Psalms beginning with the description of the wicked in Psalm 1. God's enemies are David's enemies. The psalmist asks a rhetorical question, "Do not I hate those who hate you?" He is devoted to God and opposed to all those who openly despise God. The overt enemy of God becomes his enemy. Eugene Peterson writes, ". . . Our hate needs to be prayed, not suppressed. Hate is our emotional link with the spirituality of evil. . . . Hate is often the first sign that we care."¹¹ Prayer identifies the enemy, confronts wickedness, and names the evil. "Prayer is combat. Prayer brings us before God – and there, before God, we find ourselves grappling with 'the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places' (Ephesians 6:12)."¹²

Children take comfort in their parents' protection and parents who abdicate this responsibility are delinquent parents. Dave was a young man in our church youth group who was increasingly acting out and getting into trouble. I was the youth pastor and Dave was especially upset around me. His parents were pleasant, mild-mannered and involved in church. They were mystified by Dave rebellious behavior. One night after youth group Dave painted my headlights orange and broke the antenna off my car. So, I called his parents. I said I thought we should meet and find out what's going on. I got there and Dave was storming around the house bare-chested. He had ripped his shirt off and was yelling at his parents. The parents seemed to cower before their son, ashamed of his behavior and confused. After about ten minutes of yelling, Dave began to calm down. He seemed more on the verge of tears than rage. But he was able to get his story out. He had an early morning paper route and a group of guys were demanding money from him or else they would beat him up. This had been going on for weeks and Dave was scared and angry. But the real shocker for me was that Dave had told his parents all about it and they had done nothing. They had told him to pray about it. They had left him alone to handle it on his own.

Self-Examination

*Search me, God, and know my heart;
test me and know my anxious thoughts.
See if there is any offensive way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.*

Psalm 139:23-24

⁹ R. E. O. White, *A Christian Handbook to the Psalms*, Eerdmans, 1984, 203.

¹⁰ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, IVP, 1975, 467.

¹¹ Eugene Peterson, *Answering God*, 98-100.

¹² Peterson, *Answering God*, 95.

David ends the psalm by inviting the Lord to examine his heart and expose his sin. He finds his joy by being fully known by God. Nothing escapes God's notice. His past, present, and future, his thoughts and feelings are an open book before God. He invites God's scrutiny and testing. When we worship God for who he is and what he has done, we discover who we are and what God intends for us to do. Worship not only tells the truth about God, worship also reveals the truth about ourselves. Convinced of God's love and wisdom, David is transparent before God and invites scrutiny, "See if there is any offensive way in me." The apostle Paul's prayer for the believers at Philippi leads all believers into the work of self-examination:

May your love abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God. Philippians 1:9-11

Throwing off the sin that so easily entangles is easier said than done (Heb 12:1). C. S. Lewis argued that it was "indispensable to a real understanding of the Christian faith" for all believers to detect the "real inexcusable corruption under more and more of its complex disguises." When a person is getting better, Lewis reasoned, "he understands more and more clearly the evil that is still in him," but when a person is getting worse, "he understands his own badness less and less."¹³ Detecting sin's complex disguises is on an on-going challenge for every disciple of Christ. Diagnostics requires prayerful diligence and the wisdom of insightful spiritual directors.

The soulful self finds its rest in God. Every truly self-aware person can identify with C. S. Lewis' discovery. At the age of thirty-one, while a student at Oxford, Lewis painfully realized that the secret to self-fulfillment was not to be found in himself. "I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed," he recalls. "I had tried everything in my own mind and body; as it were, asking myself, 'Is it this you want? Is it this?'" Even Lewis's noble pursuit of joy left his soul empty and unfulfilled.

I thus understood that in deepest solitude there is a road right out of the self, a commerce with something which, by refusing to identify itself with any object of the senses, or anything whereof we have biological or social need, or anything imagined, or any state of our own minds, proclaims itself sheerly objective.¹⁴

John Calvin wrote,

"Our wisdom, in so far as it ought to be deemed true and solid wisdom consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves...no person can survey himself without immediately turning his thoughts towards the God in whom he lives and moves; because it is perfectly obvious, that the endowments which we possess cannot possibly be from ourselves... It is evident that a person never attains to a true self-knowledge until he or she has previously contemplated

¹³ C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 58-59.

¹⁴ C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (London: Fontana Books, 1972), 176-177.

the face of God, and come down after such contemplation to look into himself or herself....the knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves are bound together by a mutual tie.”¹⁵

Hans Urs von Balthasar offers a deep insight when he writes, “Christian childlikeness and Christian maturity are not in tension with one another. Even at an advanced age, the saints enjoy a marvelous youthfulness.”¹⁶

¹⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol.1, book 1, chp. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 37.

¹⁶ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Unless You Become Like This Child*, 41.