

Psalm 139 and the Eye of God

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“I hear my father; I need never fear. I hear my mother; I shall never be lonely, or want for love.

When I am hungry it is they who provide for me; when I am in dismay, it is they who fill me with comfort....When I am astonished or bewildered, it is they who make the weak ground firm beneath my soul: it is in them that I put my trust....I need never fear: nor ever shall I lack for loving-kindness.”

James Agee, *A Death in the Family*

The quirky eighteenth-century philosopher and social reformer Jeremy Bentham was an atheist who had almost completely eliminated the idea of God. Almost...all that was left of the divine for Bentham was God’s all-seeing Eye.

In the late eighteenth-century in England, the issue of prison reform was much in the air. In the middle of that century, the idea of public penitentiaries had been introduced as a more systematic and humane form of punishment, over against the floggings, shaming, and village hangings that had prevailed until then. But by the 1770s, the solution had become the new problem. British prisons were widely viewed as social catastrophes. Dank, overcrowded, inhumane, rat-infested, filled with disease, prisons were chambers of horror, and there were numerous proposals for reform, many religiously motivated. In 1777, the deeply devout Calvinist John Howard published *The State of Prisons*, in which he advocated for prisons to have sanitary conditions and for the prisoners to have clean water and a good diet. Quakers called for more mercy and dignity in the treatment of prisoners as children of God, and evangelicals championed penitentiaries that truly focused on penitence and salvation.

The most unusual proposal for reform, however, was not a religious solution but a thoroughly secular one. The unbelieving Jeremy Bentham thought prisoners did not need to be coddled or redeemed; they needed to be *watched*, or, as he put it, “inspected.” He developed a new concept in prison architecture, the “Panopticon,” basically a circular building of individual prison cells with a central guard tower.

Two great principles regulated the Panopticon.¹ The first was solitude—every prisoner was to have a separate cell with private toilet facilities. There would be no opportunities for conversations, for relationships, for conspiracies, for escape plots. The sight lines of the building would ensure that no prisoner could see into the cell of another. If any prisoner tried to communicate with another by shouting out, that prisoner, said Bentham, was to be gagged, which he argued was a much more humane treatment than the leg irons of the past. The Panopticon was to be a place of permanent solitary confinement.²

The second principle was constant observation, “secular omniscience” Bentham called it. From the perch in the center of the building, the guard could see every prisoner at all times, but, since he was hidden behind a screen, the guard himself could not be seen. Therefore, it wasn’t necessary for the guard actually to surveil the

prisoners every minute. Just the very idea that someone *could* be watching them at all times was enough to keep the prisoners under control.

Even though Bentham was anti-religious, it has been noted that his Panopticon was, in effect, an architectural borrowing of medieval depictions of “the Eye of God,” particularly that found in Hieronymus Bosch’s “The Seven Deadly Sins and the Four Last Things” (1485).³ In Bosch’s painting, each of the deadly sins occupies one sector of a circle. In the center of the circle is the Eye of God, with Christ as the pupil of this divine eye, keeping constant watch on all sinners and transgressions of every kind. Below Christ is a banner that reads, “*Cave, cave, deus videt*”—“Beware, beware. God sees!”⁴

“Beware, beware. God sees!” could well be the underlying power of Bentham’s Panopticon. When he sketched the design for the Panopticon, Bentham could not resist, with a hint of sarcasm no doubt, placing a quotation from scripture on the sketch. The words fit perfectly, from Psalm 139:

Thou art about my path and about my bed:
and spiest out all my ways.
Even there also shall thy hand lead me:
and thy right hand shall hold me.
If I say, Peradventure the darkness shall cover me:
then shall my night be turned to day.
(Psalm 139:3,10-11, Coverdale translation)

As Gertrude Himmelfarb has noted in her book *Victorian Minds*,

Bentham did not believe in God, but he did believe in the qualities apotheosized in God. The Panopticon was a realization of the divine ideal, spying out the ways of the transgressor by means of an ingenious architectural scheme, turning night into day with artificial lights and reflectors, holding men captive by an intricate system of inspection. Its purpose was not so much to provide a maximum amount of human supervision, as to transcend the human and give the illusion of a divine omnipresence.⁵

To his bitter disappointment, Bentham’s architectural proposal never much caught on in prison design, but his Panopticon has become a metaphor for our own digitally intrusive times. Our entire society has become a kind of Panopticon, and we are constantly being watched by a cyber version of God’s Eye, a “secular omniscience” of unseen observers. Silent cameras watch us on highways, in stores, at stadiums, and in elevators. Programmed algorithms crawl around the internet gathering data on us all. Click on a random ad for Nike running shoes, say, and emails and ads from Zappos immediately take up residence in our inboxes and on webpages.

After Edward Snowden blew the whistle on the NSA’s Orwellian scheme to monitor all phone conversations in the country, Mick Jagger of the Rolling Stones quipped at a 2013 concert at Washington’s Verizon Center, “I don’t think President Obama is here tonight...but I’m sure he’s listening in.”⁶ In our own day, Bentham’s notion of “secular omniscience” has moved into the cultural mainstream. We all have the sense that an unseen presence is watching us, listening to us, constantly observ-

ing, tracking our secrets. We can even imagine, Bentham-like, a contemporary and menacing parody of Psalm 139:

O Google, O Facebook,
you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.
O Amazon, you search out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.
Even before a word is on my tongue,
O Cyber Lords, you know it completely.

Years ago, I was visiting a pastor friend of mine at his church. After talking for a while in his study, he offered to give me a tour of the building. He showed me the well-equipped church school classrooms, the nicely appointed kitchen and fellowship hall, the beautiful and reverent sanctuary. For the *coup de gras*, he escorted me to the front lawn of the church to survey the whole edifice. It was impressive, a neo-gothic gem, but as my eye climbed the prominent tower that soared toward the heavens, I noticed something odd. At the top on the tower, on all four sides, there were openings, apparently designed to accommodate stained-glass windows, but all four openings were boarded over. Nothing I had seen led me to think that this church had run out of money before finishing the tower, and I could hardly believe that vandals could get rocks high enough to break out the windows.

“What happened up there?” I asked, pointing to the boarded-up spaces.

“Oh, yeah. The people in the town asked us to do that,” my friend responded.

“The people in the town asked you to do that?”

“Yeah, there used to be stained-glass windows in those openings. They were depictions of the Eye of God, you know, like on the back of the dollar bill,” he said, making a triangle with his fingers over his right eye. “The windows were illuminated at night, and you could see them all over town. You could see them from the mall. You could see them from the high school. A lot of people complained. They told us they believed in God, but they didn’t want God looking at them all the time.”

The image of the Eye of God has made a sad migration. In the Old Testament, God’s Eye watches protectively over Israel:

[H]e who watches over Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.
The Lord watches over you—
the Lord is your shade at your right hand;
the sun will not harm you by day,
nor the moon by night.
The Lord will keep you from all harm—
he will watch over your life;
the Lord will watch over your coming and going
both now and forevermore. (Psalm 121:4-8 NIV)

By the thirteenth century, though, the chanted Gregorian mass included the omi-

nous hymn *Dies Irae* (“The Day of Wrath”) in which the Eye of God has become a searchlight of guilt and shame:

That day of wrath, that dreadful day,
shall heaven and earth in ashes lay.
What horror must invade the mind
when the approaching Judge shall find
and sift the deeds of all mankind! ...
Now death and nature with surprise
behold the trembling sinners rise
to meet the Judge’s searching eyes.

Today, the all-seeing Eye of God has become a secularized, uncaring omniscience, manipulating our consumer lusts, exposing our once-hidden secrets, recording our thoughts and actions in a permanent record of shame and social control.

All of this has a direct impact on how we read and hear Psalm 139 today. Once Psalm 139 was a song of comfort. “God is Thou to the psalmist’s I,” writes James L. Mays. “The psalmist is free for and to God.”⁷ But to our ears today, Psalm 139 can come across as invasive and menacing, whether in the context of the all-seeing and accusing medieval Eye of God or the pervasive, all-knowing eye of Amazon, Psalm 139 can now seem more threatening than comforting. We hear of a God who searches us, a God whose penetrating gaze we cannot escape. “Where can I flee from your presence?” asks the psalmist. “If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.” Like the townspeople in my friend’s village, do we really want the unavoidable stare of God?

Years ago in a radio interview, country singer Dolly Parton was talking about how show business constantly presents challenges to one’s moral life. “But I always know,” said Dolly, expressing the popular piety of many, “that the man upstairs is watching.” But the God of this piety holds more in common with the guard in Bentham’s Panopticon than it does with the God of Psalm 139. So, as we read and preach Psalm 139, we need first to address the collateral damage done by reading the psalm out of context. In order to keep the psalm from being misheard as a psalm of terror, to banish from the hearers’ imagination the image of God as some fear-inducing “Bad Santa” who “knows when you’ve been sleeping, and knows when you’re awake, and knows when you’ve been bad or good,” we should begin by recovering the psalm’s true theological context. We do indeed hear of a God who knows and searches and watches without ceasing, but God’s watchfulness is not the abstract gaze of a traffic cam or an all-seeing drone flying overhead just out of sight, and even more, it is not the punitive scrutiny of a wrathful judge. The Eye of God in Psalm 139 can best be understood, I contend, in parental terms, as the watchfulness of a loving mother, a loving father.

First, we can see that the main images in the psalm are parental. This God who has “searched me” knows “when I sit down and when I rise up” (v. 2). What good parents have not tucked their children in at night and listened in the morning for the sounds of their rising? What good parents have not pulled back the curtains on the bedroom window and watched anxiously for the return of the teenaged child late at night? This God watches over us from heaven to Sheol, and we cannot flee from God’s

presence (vv.7-8), but this all-seeing, all-present God does not pursue us to catch us in iniquity and to punish but, like a good parent, to protect and guide us. “[E]ven there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast” (v. 10).

Beyond these specific images, or rather when all of these images in the psalm are taken as a whole, Psalm 139 expresses the theme of parental care in another way as well. In *A Rumor of Angels*, Peter Berger speaks of the role of the parent as “a world builder and world protector.” Imagine, he writes, “A child wakes up in the night, perhaps from a bad dream and finds himself surrounded by darkness, alone, beset by nameless threats. At such a moment the contours of trusted reality are blurred and invisible, in the terror of incipient chaos the child cries out for his mother.”⁵ What will the mother do? She will, of course, slip on her robe and go quickly to the child, cradling the child in her arms. Berger writes, “She will turn on a lamp, perhaps, which will encircle the scene with a warm glow of reassuring light. She will speak or sing to the child and the content of this communication will invariably be the same—‘Don’t be afraid—everything is in order, everything is all right.’”⁸

But then Berger raises a troubling question: “Is the mother lying to the child?” Does she not know of the terrors of the world that beset us? Does she not know that one day she will die, and so will her child? How can she hold the child in her arms and say, “Everything is all right”? If it is true, says Berger, “that the ‘natural’ is the only reality there is,” then, yes, the mother is lying, lying out of love for her child to be sure, but lying nonetheless. But, Berger argues, the reassurance of the mother that all is well rests not on the circumstances of the morrow or the news of the coming days, but on the nature of reality as such. Even if the mother is not fully aware of the depth of her words, when she tells her frightened child that “everything is all right...not just this particular anxiety, not just this particular pain—but *everything is all right*,” she is telling the truth “only if there is some truth in the religious interpretation of existence.”⁹

To put it in terms of the psalm, the mother in the night can reassure her child that everything is all right only if reality is in the hands of the God who is behind us and before us and who lays the hand of care upon us, only if God provides more than the occasional gift or answered prayer but instead supplies an overarching, trustworthy frame of meaning. We can withstand the terrors of the night and rest in the promise that “all is well” only if we can say of God, “Even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you” (Ps. 139:12). One of the roles that God fulfills as benevolent parent is to assure those who hear God’s Word that reality has a trustworthy order—not the order of this or that fragile society but order as such; the underlying order of the universe is held together by providence so that it makes sense to trust. As Calvin said of God’s parental care,

[W]e must be persuaded not only that as he once formed the world, so he sustains it by his boundless power, governs it by his wisdom, preserves it by his goodness, in particular, rules the human race with justice and judgment, bears with them in mercy, shields them by his protection; but also that not a particle of light, or wisdom, or justice, or power, or rectitude, or genuine truth, will anywhere be found, which does not flow from him, and of which he is not the cause; in this way we must learn to expect and ask all things from him, and thankfully ascribe to him whatever we receive....

For, until men feel that they owe everything to God, *that they are cherished by his paternal care*, and that he is the author of all their blessings, so that nought is to be looked for away from him, they will never submit to him in voluntary obedience; nay, unless they place their entire happiness in him, they will never yield up their whole selves to him in truth and sincerity.¹⁰

But there is in Psalm 139 a seeming break in this sea of untroubled providence. In a way that has been disturbing to ordinary readers of the psalm and to scholars as well, Psalm 139 suddenly takes on a dark mood. “O that you would kill the wicked, O God...Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord?...I hate them with perfect hatred” (vv. 21-22).

Who are these enemies who are hated? Who is it that the psalmist wishes would be killed at the hands of God? Historically, we are not sure. They could be blasphemers or perhaps just troublemakers who are making life hard for the psalmist. The psalms, especially the laments, are full of such petitions, appeals to God to destroy whatever foes are besieging the psalmist.

But, once again, this section of the psalm is best heard in a parental context. Funeral director and essayist Thomas Lynch remembers his earliest days as a mortician and the trauma of burying infants and children:

Because I would not keep in stock an inventory of children’s caskets, I’d order them, as the need arose, in sizes and half sizes from two foot to five foot six, often estimating the size of a dead child, not yet released from the county morgue, by the sizes of my own children, safe and thriving and alive....

I was a new parent and the new undertaker in a town where births and deaths are noticed. And one of the things I noticed was the number of stillbirths and fetal deaths we were called upon to handle...[I]n addition to the hundred adult funerals we handled every year in those days, we would be called upon to take care of the burial of maybe a dozen infants—babies born dead, or born living but soon dead from some anomaly....

And I remember in those first years as a father and a funeral director, new at making babies and at burying them, I would often wake in the middle of the night, sneak into the rooms where my sons and daughter slept, and bend to their crib sides to hear them breathe. It was enough. I did not need astronauts or presidents or doctors or lawyers. I only wanted them to breathe. Like my father, I had learned to fear.¹¹

Viewed in the context of the parental love and care of God, the enemies of Psalm 139:19-22 are nothing so trivial as the vexing co-worker, the irritating neighbor, or the wicked relative who has designs on your share of the inheritance. It impoverishes the psalm to imply that those who do not have faith in God are our enemies, worthy of being detested, or even worse, that those we name as our enemies are automatically God’s enemies, too, and the target of divine hatred. Psalm 139 is about the parental God who watches over us and about the trustworthy world this implies. The enemy of Psalm 139 is that which threatens to undermine the trustworthiness of God’s care and to sever the grateful and faithful relationship between human beings and the motherly,

fatherly God who tends to us from birth to the end, from the heights of heaven to the depths of Sheol. The enemy is ultimately Death, capital “D” death, the final enemy, who, in all its guises, threatens to destroy what the rest of the psalm proclaims. The naming of this enemy is not an awkward and unwelcome intrusion into the psalm; it is a necessity. As philosopher Charles Taylor has written,

A too benign picture of the human condition leaves something crucial out, something that matters to us. There is a dark side to creation, to use this (Barthian) expression; along with joy, there is massive innocent suffering; and then on top of this, the suffering is denied, the story of the victims is distorted, eventually forgotten, never rectified or compensated. Along with communion, there is division, alienation, spite, mutual forgetfulness, never reconciled and brought together again.

Even where a voice of faith wants to deny that this is the last word, as with Christianity, we cannot set aside the fact that this is what we live, that we regularly experience this as ultimate. All great religions recognize this, and place their hopes in a beyond which doesn’t simply deny this, which takes its reality seriously....

Simply negating [the dark side of creation], as many of us modern Christians are tempted to do, leaves a vacuum. Or it leaves rather an unbelievably benign picture, which cannot but provoke people either to unbelief, or to...faith, unless it leads to a recovery of the mystery of the Crucifixion, of world-healing through the suffering of the God-man. Certainly this central mystery of Christian faith becomes invisible, if one tries to paint the dark out of Creation.¹²

We are now reading the psalm as Christians, reading it Christologically. The psalmist tells the truth when, in the midst of praise and thanksgiving, he sees that this fabric of divine care has been infected by “enemies,” and he cries out, “O that you would kill the wicked, O God.” The answer is not a sword but a cross. God who searches for us in darkness, who comes to us even when we have made our bed in Sheol, is revealed in the Christ who came to seek and save the lost, the Christ who was crucified, dead, and buried, the Christ who has searched us and known us, whose pursuit of us knows no boundaries, even to the point that he descended into hell. “Even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast” (v. 10).

The gifted preacher and teacher Fred Craddock once observed that when children play hide-and-seek, a child who finds a perfect hiding place begins chirping gleefully, “They’ll never find me! They’ll never find me!” But as the minutes go by in hidden isolation, this glee turns to anxious fear: “Hey, they’ll never find me. They’ll never find me.” The psalmist knows this fear, the fear of never being found, the fear of living in hidden isolation, but he is able to sing, nevertheless, a song of faith and trust: “My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my unformed substance” (vv. 15-16). When Thomas Lynch confessed that the sad task of burying children had taught him fear, he goes on to say, “But faith is, so far as I know it, the only known cure for fear—the sense that someone is in charge here, is checking the ID’s and watching the borders. Faith is what my mother said: letting go and letting God—a leap into the

unknown where we are not in control but always welcome.”¹³

Psalms 139 is not just a psalm of praise to the searching, loving God, but also a testimony to that nature of reality. At its deepest rhythms, it testifies, “This is the way it is. The never-ceasing providence of God. This is truly the way it is.”

Jayson Greene is a father who remembers that even when his daughter Greta was young enough to be in diapers, she loved playing a game of hide-and-seek. She and Jayson would be playing in her room when suddenly Greta would run out into the hall, just out of sight. She would call out to her father from her hiding place, “Where’s Greta?” Jayson would act as if he were greatly perplexed, “turning over small toys on the floor to see if she was under them, peeking behind the couch, clutching my head in mock terror. ‘Oh no, what have we done?’ I would moan. ‘We’ve lost her!’ She would laugh, run back in, and announce, ‘Greta came right back!’”¹⁴

But then, the unthinkable happened. Greta and her grandmother, on an outing together, sit down on a bench on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, grandmother and granddaughter, enjoying the day. From the ledge of an apartment above them, a brick is somehow dislodged, falls eight stories, and strikes Greta in the head. As a woman living in the apartment building said, “It was like an evil force reached down....”

After hours of agonizing waiting in the pediatric ICU at the hospital, Jayson and his wife Stacy are told by the surgeon the news no parent can imagine hearing, “Her condition is stable, but the brain injury is such that she will never wake up.” She waits a beat, then, more quietly, “I believe her prognosis is fatal.”

Jayson and Stacy go immediately to Greta’s bedside in the ICU to say farewell:

We walk into Greta’s room; we are, we now understand, greeting our dead child. Her face is yellow and glistening with IV fluid, her skull swollen and blue, with obscene steel staples running down the center. We flank the bed, each holding on to a hand.

“Hi, monkey,” my wife says. “We didn’t get very much time together. It wasn’t enough, was it?”¹⁵

After Greta died, Jayson and Stacy tried, with halting success, to resume their regular lives. Jayson began to take his daily run in the streets of the city, but there was one place he still refused to go: the park. “The park, he said, “was our place, Greta’s and mine—every tree, every leaf, every passing doggy belonged to the two of us.” But then one day, he feels an unexpected sensation. Something tells him, “I need to go running in the park.” And that is what he does. He jogs past children playing, past a middle-school football team doing drills, past a couple of kids swatting a baseball. And then, “There at the park’s mouth, my heart stirs, and I feel a peculiar elation. I recognize her. Greta is somewhere nearby. I feel her energy, playfully expectant. *Come find me, Daddy*, she says. Tears spring and run freely down my face. *I hear you, baby girl*, I whisper. *Daddy’s coming to get you*.

Suddenly, he sees her, sees his daughter in his imagination, sees his Greta. The child who would always end hide-and-seek by saying with a laugh, “Greta come right back.” There she was. Jayson said,

Standing in the park, staring at her, I make a strange and primal sound, deep and rich like a belly laugh, hard and sharp like a sob. *You are here. You*

picked the park. Good choice, baby girl. Oblivious to the people around me, I run to her. She wiggles in anticipatory joy. Stooping down, I scoop her up under her soft armpits, her shoulder blades meeting at the pads of my fingers, and I lift her up into the sky. She is invisible to passersby—to them, there is nothing in the spot next to the tree where she stands laughing and clapping but a patch of grass, and there is nothing in my arms but air.¹⁶

Reflecting on this experience some days later, Jayson said, “I am treading ether, a new and unfamiliar kind of contact high. I have been raised secular by my parents, and I’ve never set foot in a church for more than an hour. But I will do anything for Greta, I am learning. And that includes becoming a mystic, so that I might still enjoy her company.”

What happened here? A spasm of profound grief? A mystical experience? A rustling of angels’ wings? A word from the Holy Spirit? Who can sort it out? And why should we need to? A father’s desperate and loving search for a lost child surely points beyond this one experience to the even deeper truth of Psalm 139, the never-ending providence of God, the truth of God the loving parent who never ceases to search for us, to find us, to know our frame, and to lead us in the way everlasting.

This is the way it is. This is truly the way it is.

Notes

1 See this discussion of Bentham’s Panopticon in Gertrude Himmelfarb, *Victorian Minds* (New York: Knopf, 1968), chapter 2.

2 Realizing later that solitary confinement was “more than human nature could bear” (here he quoted John Howard), Bentham changed his mind about individual cells. The prison, he now argued, should have cells that accommodate two, three, or four prisoners, depending upon their character and other circumstances. See Himmelfarb, *Victorian Minds*, 45-46.

3 David Lyons, “Surveillance and the Eye of God,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 27/1 (2014). See also Astrit Schmidt-Burkhardt, “The All Seer: God’s Eye as Proto-Surveillance,” in Thomas Y. Levin, et al (eds), *Rhetorics of Surveillance from Bentham to Big Brother* (Karlsruhe: ZKM Centre for Art and Media, 2002), 16-31.

4 Hieronymus Bosch’s “The Seven Deadly Sins and the Four Last Things” can be seen at <https://www.wikiart.org/en/hieronymus-bosch/the-seven-deadly-sins-and-the-four-last-things-1485>.

5 Himmelfarb, *Victorian Minds*, 35.

6 Lloyd Green, “Edward Snowden Writes in 50 Shades of Grey,” *The Guardian*, September 22, 2019, accessed at <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/sep/22/permanent-record-review-edward-snowden-memoir>.

7 James L. Mays, *Psalms: Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), 427.

8 Peter L. Berger, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (New York: Anchor, 1970), 54-55.

9 *Ibid.*, 55.

10 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion I:1.2*, translated by Henry Beveridge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), 8-9, emphasis mine.

11 Thomas Lynch, *The Undertaking: Life Studies from the Dismal Trade* (New York: Norton, 2009), 50-54.

12 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 319.

13 Lynch, *The Undertaking*, 54.

14 Jayson Greene, “The Unthinkable Has Happened,” *Vulture*, April 10, 2019, <https://www.vulture.com/2019/04/jayson-greene-memoir-once-more-we-saw-stars-book-excerpt.html>.

15 *Ibid.*

16 *Ibid.*