

A Grain of Sand 139:17-18

How precious to me are your thoughts, O God; How vast is the sum of them. Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand. When I awake, I am still with you

Howard Thurman, the prolific, African American preacher and mystic, lived to be 81 years old and prayed this 139th Psalm every day of his adult life. Could you pray Psalm 139 every day for the rest of your life? Could you pray any Scripture or prayer every day for the rest of your life? Now, we all might pray scriptures for the rest of our lives, but the same Scripture? He prayed this Scripture every day of his adult life. He called this 139th chapter of Psalms, “The Great Passage.” He said that if the entire Bible would be destroyed, and he could only have one chapter -- if he could only have one chapter -- it would be the 139th Psalm. He even wrote a poem for every line of this Psalm – a whole poem for every line of the 139th Psalm.

How could he pray this 139th Psalm every day except that he found within the boundaries of this text the presence of God speaking illuminating revelation on a daily basis? How could he pray this Psalm every day except that it gave him access to a limitless ocean of hope,

the very voice of God, speaking the thoughts of God, feeding him the words of life? How could he pray this same Psalm except it be the fulfillment of what Jesus said quoting the Hebrew Bible -- that we do not live by bread alone, but every word that proceeds from the mouth of God and Give us this day our daily bread. God giving spiritual and physical food every day. How could he do it except that it speaks the very thoughts of God? God communicating God's wisdom and thoughts every day. No wonder the Psalmist could say:

**How precious to me are your thoughts, O God
How vast is the sum of them
Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand**

Psalm 139 presents God as the all-knowing God. The Lord knows us and knows us completely. The Hebrew "to know" appears seven times – you know me . . . you know me when . . . you know it completely . . . such knowledge. God knows our thoughts, action. God knows us in our mother's womb. God knows our thoughts before they are spoken. God knows us. God knows us. God knows us. God knows us.

The beauty of God knowing us is that it is relational and not judgmental. God knows us in relationship and not singularly in judgment. God knows us and even if there is judgment, there is a

return – a moment will be offered to us to restore right relationship. God knows us to bestow favor and revelation. God’s thoughts are revelation. God knows us to reveal God’s truth and wisdom to us. The Psalmist says: How precious are your revelations oh God – if I were to number them they would outnumber the sands on the seas.

In the manner of Howard Thurman, let me recite portions of Psalm 139 –

You have searched me, Lord,
and you know me.

2 You know when I sit and when I rise;
you perceive my thoughts from afar.

3 You discern my going out and my lying down;
you are familiar with all my ways.

4 Before a word is on my tongue
you, Lord, know it completely.

5 You hem me in behind and before,
and you lay your hand upon me.

6 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,
too lofty for me to attain.

7 Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?

8 If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

9 If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
if I settle on the far side of the sea,

10 even there your hand will guide me,
your right hand will hold me fast.

11 If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me
and the light become night around me,"

12 even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like
the day, for darkness is as light to you.

13 For you created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.

14 I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful,
I know that full well.

15 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.

16 Your eyes saw my unformed body;
all the days ordained for me were written in your book
before one of them came to be.

17 How precious to me are your thoughts,[God!
How vast is the sum of them!

18 Were I to count them,
they would outnumber the grains of sand—

How vast is the revelation of God -- how vast are the thoughts of

God – God knows us – loves us – and reveal to us. How precious to
me are your thoughts oh God.

I wonder if we ever stopped to take time to say, "How precious
are your thoughts, O God – How vast is the sum of them – If I were to

count them, they would outnumber the grains of the sands of the sea.” I wonder if we have the humility to appreciate the thoughts of God. Humility. So what do I mean by humility? Let me give you an example -- no matter how profound I think my paper or sermon is, or how deep my latest book or weighty my most academic and spiritual insights – I hate to break this to myself: but I am simply handling one grain of sand of an endless number of the thoughts of God -- much like the grains that make up the sands of the sea – no matter how good it is, it is but a grain of a limitless ocean of the voice of God. “How precious are your thoughts, O God – How vast is the sum of them – If I were to count them, they would outnumber the grains of the sands of the sea.” You just got my first point – the humility to see no matter how insightful your insight (music, Sunday School lesson, your teaching) is from God – it is one grain of God’s thought of an endless seashore of God’s thoughts.

Second, even though it is one grain, we could in fact spend one lifetime on one grain of sand. You see one grain is a micro-cosmos, constituted by millions of atoms, protons, neutrons – an infinity and a universe of infinity in and of itself. To give you a sense of the cosmos that is one grain of sand, let’s look at the atoms in one grain of salt.

One grain of salt is similar to one grain of sand. Let's suppose that we want to count all the atoms in a single grain of salt and let's assume that we are able to count one billion atoms per second. Despite our considerable speed, we would need over five hundred years to count the number of atoms inside a tiny grain of salt. Despite its exceedingly small size, there is a flawless, unique and complex system inside the atom comparable in sophistication to the system that we see in the universe. So one verse of Scripture is so complex that you could spend five hundred years at 1 billion insights per second to count the insights and revelation from God, it might explain how we could pray the same psalm every day for the rest of our lives. It might explain why we all these scholars and theologians, exploring for generations upon generations – all of our books, and our dissertations, and our sermons, and our thoughts, meditations, and reflections are in reality one atom in one grain of sand of the limitless seashore of the thoughts of God.

Then just one grain, one verse can save the world. One grain can save a life, save a soul, save a home, save a community, save a world. With one grain, we offer hope to the hopeless – we offer a friend to the friendless – one grain can stop a war – overcome a hurt -

- cancel the sting of death – one grain can rescue the lost –give sight to the blind – make deaf folk hear – make the lame leap for joy – one grain can feed the world, remove deterioration of our common home – one verse can finally resolve the long shadow of racism from human relationships – one verse can bring every kind of justice that you can name –

One verse – they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength – they shall mount up on wings like eagles, they will run and not be weary – they will walk and not faint

One verse – the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases – God’s mercies never come to an end, they are new every morning – Great is thy faithfulness

One verse – God was in Christ reconciling the world such that all who called upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.

One verse: In this world, you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.

One verse: For God so loved the world that God gave the only begotten son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life

One verse -- How precious to me are your thoughts, O God. How vast is the sum of them. Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand

Howard Thurman said that he noticed in people who work for justice and improving social conditions, something very similar, a kind of despair. He said that many activists recognized that what they

were doing was good, true, and significant, but they were working against the way things fundamentally were in human life, and it caused in them a kind of despair. Human beings are, for example, fundamentally selfish, and to improve things, people are asked through moral suasion to be unselfish, to be concerned without someone outside their group, persons that normally they would not consider their sisters and brothers. And even if the appeal is not to moral suasion, but demands for equality made from the power politics of numbers and marches and economic strength through boycotts, still the entrenched forces of opposition mutate and find ways to maneuver such to co-opt the movement and the progress made. For those love freedom and justice, there is the glory of victory that makes change and the agony of defeat that no matter what changes things stay the same. Those that work for justice come to know the depth of the reality of human nature and the entrenchment of forces against freedom and justice. Thurman was aware of this truth, and labeled it a susceptibility to despair. He offered to many in the struggle for justice, like MLK, and many of us today, hope.

Thurman says, the original meaning to the word hope was an inlet that connects the lagoon to the ocean such that the lagoon can

have free and easy access to the ocean and the ocean can have free and easy access to the lagoon. Scripture, and one verse of Scripture is hope – is the inlet to the limitless ocean – every verse is an inlet of hope that if we meditate upon it and if we pray it – it provides the lagoon of our own souls access to the limitless wisdom of the oceans of the thoughts of God. One verse. As I go to my seat – what is your one verse – what is the one verse that is our inlet – that gives you access to the limitless sea.

I am here to say to you that it is good to know the whole Bible, but all you need is one verse. Can I tell you my one verse:

God is our refuge and strength – a very present help in the time of trouble therefore we will not fear though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, and the waters roar and foam – there is a river...

Oh God our help in ages past, our hope for years to come, our shelter from the stormy blast and our eternal home...

Can I get one more in before I sit? Weeping may endure for the night but joy comes in the morning.

Does anybody here have one verse?

—*Frank Thomas* ©2019

