

What Exactly Does ‘Fearfully and Wonderfully Made’ Mean?

In December 2021, NASA launched the James Webb Space Telescope, the most powerful telescope ever deployed. We are seeing details about the universe that have never before been seen by human beings.

As profound as those images are, they are no more amazing than the images from the most powerful electron microscopes that give us details of the subatomic world. Whether looking out into space or into the tiniest structures on earth, details abound.

Whether through a telescope or a microscope, we see the detailed reflections of our Creator God. While the authors of Scripture had no access to the far-reaching or deep-reaching instruments we have today, they still knew intuitively what we now can validate scientifically: The universe, and all it contains, is “fearfully and wonderfully made.”

In Psalm 139, David wrote about the amazing conception, creation and care of every human being. He drew the same conclusions that expectant parents draw today when they view a color, 3D sonogram image of their developing child in the womb—breathless awe at the miracle of life.

David’s words in Psalm 139, confirmed by the images we are blessed to have during pregnancy, are the foundation for the Christian pro-life position on the sanctity of life. Every life is God-made; every life is unique and precious; every life has a temporal and a universal purpose.

Let’s take the psalmist’s words one verse at a time as we marvel at his perspective on who we are and how we came to be—and where our steps in life will lead.

The Fact of My Being

“For You formed my inward parts; You covered me in my mother’s womb” (Ps. 139:13).

In Psalm 139, David contemplates the omniscience (all-knowing) and omnipresence (everywhere present) of God. Just before verse 13, David says that even when it is totally dark, God is still with him because “the darkness and the light are both alike to You” (v. 12).

He then proves his point by thinking of the darkest place he can imagine: a mother’s womb. Even in his mother’s womb, God was with David, for God was there creating him, forming David’s “inward parts.” The word for “covered” in verse 13 is actually the Hebrew word for “knit” or “weave”—a beautiful image of God forming David a “stitch” at a time.

It’s an appropriate image. Think of how a sweater or scarf is knitted—one stitch at a time. To stretch the metaphor for illustrative purposes, think of every stitch as a human cell, of which there are about 26 billion in a newborn baby. There were only two at first—a sperm and an egg—but over nine months the human zygote divides and divides exponentially. If David had known that biology, he would probably have said, “Yes—God knitted me together a cell at a time.”

David was not ambivalent about the origin of every human being. His words convey an active sense of initiative on God’s part. God is the One who formed you and me in our mothers’ wombs.

The Fashion of My Being

“I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; marvelous are Your works, and that my soul knows very well” (Ps. 139:14).

Having established the fact that it was God who created him,

David then considers how God fashioned him. And he uses a phrase that has been problematic for most interpreters: "I am fearfully and wonderfully made." In spite of the complexity of the original Hebrew, almost all modern English translations of the Bible use this same phrase: "fearfully and wonderfully."

"Wonderfully" we can understand—we use the word *wonderful* frequently in our language. But what does "fearfully" mean? Think about the frequent phrase in Scripture, "the fear of the Lord," as in, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Prov. 9:10). While there is an element of being afraid in these uses (Matt. 10:28), the deeper notion is respect, honor and awe. That is, literal fear is usually a result of the strength, majesty or awe in the one we fear.

And that is the sense here. David is saying, "I am awestruck at how you have made me!" As David contemplated the details of his adult body, he was literally amazed at its beauty, efficiency and ability. His respect was twofold: awe at his body itself and awe at the ability of the One who created it.

The Frame of My Being

"My frame was not hidden from You, when I was made in secret, and skillfully wrought in the lowest parts of the earth. Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed" (Ps. 139:15-16).

Again, David refers to God's omnipresence. Even in one of the darkest places on earth—his mother's womb—God was framing (fashioning) him. Think of the womb: It is "hidden" from everyone (but not from God); it is a "secret" place (but not to God); it is as dark as "the lowest parts of the earth" (but not to God, for whom light and dark are the same).

David perhaps thought of the womb as being dark like a grave ("the lowest parts of the earth") or perhaps a cave—with which he was experienced (1 Sam. 22:1; 24:3). In either case, his point was the same: God is with the developing baby in the womb! What seems dark and silent and solitary to us is not

that way when God is there—and He is there “skillfully” fashioning the growing child. Detail by detail, God is framing the new human being: heart, soul, mind and body.

Who can see in the dark? Only God: “Your eyes saw” my developing body and life. From our perspective, it is as if there was a bright light in the womb, providing illumination for God’s handiwork. But God needs no such light. His eyes were watching the work of His hands, detail by detail as David grew.

The Future of My Being

“And in Your book they all were written, the days fashioned for me, when as yet there were none of them” (Ps. 139:16).

It was not just David’s body that God fashioned while he was in his mother’s womb. It was also “the days” of his life before any of them came to be. Before David was even born, God had knitted into his life the days laid out for him.

✘ The Old Testament is replete with references to God’s “book” or “register”—an image taken from the kings of the era who kept meticulous records of their kingdoms’ activities. While God doesn’t have a literal book, David knew that part of God’s fashioning process was his future—the plan and purpose God had for his life on earth.

What do we conclude from David’s beautiful testimony? First, there are no human accidents. Second, God has orchestrated the past, present and future details of our life. Third, we can trust Him for the plan and purpose He has for us.

Praise God that you are fearfully and wonderfully made! Let that truth bring extra purpose and confidence to each of your days.

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