



Women's Bible Study
In Desiring to Know God: Psalm 139
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In the early days of fall, I would often take my study questions out into the woods along with our new puppy, Pippin. In addition to my Bible, questions, and a pen, I also carried a pocketful of tiny pieces of meat. That probably explains why I keep finding moldy baggies full of treats in my coat pockets! Anyway, I let Pippin off the leash, and watched her roam around the woods as I studied, continually calling her back each time she began to stray. She learned to run back at top speed to receive the treat from my hand. In fact, many of my Psalms are covered with little muddy paw prints as her momentum would take her straight up onto my lap and the Bible I was reading. I wanted her to know that she must never be out of the sound of my voice. She could frolic all she wanted to, as long as she did not run away.

This lesson worked well for about two months. Then, alas, Pippin became a gangly adolescent with an attitude. It was then we started getting polite calls from neighbors two, three or five houses down the street saying, "We have Pippin at our house." And that was the end of her freedom. Until Pippin learns again that she cannot leave the sound of our voices, she can't roam free.

Like Pippin, we are all bound to obey God's voice, either willingly, or unwillingly. If we resist, we find ourselves leashed and chained by the consequences of sin. And the Bible tells us that one day everyone will recognize Jesus as Lord, and every knee will bow before him whether or not we knew him as our sovereign on earth.

Psalm 139 is a lovely, poetic acknowledgement of God's sovereignty – his right to be king of our lives. It is because he is our sovereign that we desire to be known by him. He already knows us better than anyone else.

The doctrine of God's sovereignty is very freeing. Because, you see, when we accept that he has the right to direct our paths, we are liberated from the heavy burden of fending for ourselves. As life's catastrophes heap upon us, and things happen over which we have no control, isn't it good to know that our Sovereign is orchestrating all those events for blessing rather than evil? And it is all the more comforting to know that this good God, who desires the best for us, deeply knows us and loves us.

So how can we know that God is truly our king, and desires to know us and be known by us?

First,

I. *Because he is able (Psalm 139: 1-12)*

It seems to me that one of the most basic human longings is to know, and be known by another person. It might be a spouse, a friend, a sister – but most of us seek a relationship that will allow us to truly know and be known.

But this is a tough goal. People we meet as adults don't know us as children, for example, so there is always a part they missed out on. But it's mostly impossible because we have a fallen nature, which makes us secretive. It causes us to present ourselves falsely. After Adam and Eve sinned, the first thing they did was cover themselves and hide from God. We do the same with others.

But all those defenses fall before the loving eyes of God. I recently read about Victorian parents who hung a giant picture of an eye on their children's bedroom wall with the text "His eye watches me" from the Psalms. Comforting, isn't it, to have a giant eye staring at you all night long...I think not! The idea of being watched makes us squirm, but at the same time, we *want* to be known to someone else.

Listen to how David marvels at God's knowledge of him in Psalm 139 v. 1:

**"O Lord, you have searched me 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 know it completely, O Lord.**

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

**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.'" (v. 1-12)**

In the 19th century Francis Thompson wrote a long poem called *The Hound of Heaven*. He talks about fleeing from one distraction to the next, but finding no pleasure. First he discovers that he cannot outrun the voice that follows him. Everyone betrays him, because he betrays God. Next he discovers that there is no shelter when one runs from God: 'Naught shelters thee, who wilt not shelter Me.'

And nothing satisfies, either:

'Lo! Naught contents thee, who content'st not Me.'

In the end the Voice asks him:

“Whom wilt thou find to love ignoble thee,
Save Me, save only Me?
All which I took from thee I did but take,
Not for thy harms,
But just that thou might’st seek it in My arms.
All which thy child’s mistake
Fancies as lost, I have stored for thee at home:
Rise, clasp My hand, and come!”

You see, the hound of heaven hunts for the souls of men, and will not be turned away. The story behind this poem is a sad one. The author Francis Thompson grew up as the son of a doctor and went on to study medicine. However, he hated it so much that he rebelled and disappeared. After three homeless years on the streets in London, he was starving, and yet managed to compose some poetry. This was submitted anonymously to a Catholic magazine, with the return address to a Post Office. Because the publishers could not reach the author, they printed the poetry in hopes that the author would come forward to claim his payment. He did, but the publishers first had to pay money for opium to one of his creditors. That day was the last time that Francis Thompson was in want, for he was never again without friends, food, clothing or shelter. The new Catholic friends helped him to kick opium and provided him with a place at a monastery where he could begin a new life as a writer. In gratitude he wrote *The Hound of Heaven*.

It symbolizes the God who comes looking for us in our extremity, just as David described in these verses of Psalm 139. Where shall I flee from thy presence, David asks...where indeed?

God is able to search us and to truly know us, because of his omnipotence, omnipresence, and omniscience. These three words mean simply that he is all powerful, that he’s able to be everywhere at once, and that he knows everything. No human can do that.

Now imagine a deity who knew all, could do anything, and was everywhere at once, but hated us. Our lives would be sheer terror, as he toyed with us. But this is not our Sovereign. The motive behind his care over us is love.

David makes this clear in the psalms: **“But you, O God, do see trouble and grief; you consider it to take it in hand. The victim commits himself to you; you are the helper of the fatherless.” (Psalm 10:14) “But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, for he has been good to me.” (Psalm 13:5-6).**

That motive of love behind God’s care is explained to us again by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: **“Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?” (Matthew 6:25-26)**

Think of the way a mother interacts with a new baby: **“You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways.” (v.3)** Mothers know what their young children are doing at all times. Even when a baby inarticulately communicates its needs through crying or facial expression, a mother usually knows what those signify: **“Before a word is on my tongue, you know it completely, O Lord.” (v. 4).** This degree of knowledge is not

suffocating or inappropriate; it's necessary – necessary for the care of a child who is not able yet to discern good from bad, or to care for himself. God looks on us just as tenderly as we look on our infants. His purpose is to help us grow to maturity.

In verse 7 we get the impression that David isn't sure whether all that love and care is such a good thing. It does mean that we are not able to hide. And David, as a veteran of spectacular sin, understands that while we can kid ourselves that God is looking the other way, we cannot evade his scrutiny. Next week we will study Psalm 51, a psalm of repentance written by David after he committed adultery with Bathsheba. Imagine David's horror when, thinking he'd gotten away with everything, he was confronted by the priest Nathan. God always knows what we're up to, so continuing sin is only going to provide a later reckoning. David expresses this in v. 8:

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

David, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, tells us that there is no place that God cannot go. He is, of course, in heaven, for that is God's home. But he is equally authoritative in the place of the dead, in Sheol. We know from 1st Peter that Jesus Christ himself "spoke to the spirits in prison". (1 Peter 3:18: **He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit, through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison...**) There is no physical location which is barred to God. And that understanding is expanded by David in verses 9-10.

**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.**

Donald Barnhouse tells a fanciful story about Jonah. Jonah was a prophet of God, called by God to speak to the wicked city of Ninevah. He rebelled, and, going down to the harbor, took a ship in the opposite direction from where he was supposed to go. Barnhouse imagines that this ship had a proper Roman name: "The Wings of the Dawn". Now imagine that ship setting off towards Tarshish, and instead, being forced to a standstill, all to bring Jonah face to face with God. You can't take the wings of the dawn and escape him!

But David probably meant these phrases to denote "east and west". Literally, we can go as far in any direction that we like – but we cannot go out of God's reach. **"Even there your hand will guide me."**

Others tried to hide from God by doing their wicked deeds at night. When Saul wanted to consult a witch, he went at night to Endor, in disguise, because he knew what he was doing was wrong. The adulteress in Proverbs 7 lays her snare for a young man at twilight, **"as the day was fading, as the dark of night set in." (Prov. 7: 9)**

But Psalm 139 tells us that darkness is the same as light to God, because he has no need of external sources of light. He IS light, and therefore, the darkness is as light to God. This is both a comforting and a terrible truth for us. It is comforting, because whenever we are in a dark place – either physically, or spiritually - that dark place is light to God. But it is also a terrible truth since there is literally nowhere to hide from the eye of God.

So in these verses we see that God has this relationship with us, because he is *able to* have it. He has the attributes that make knowing and being known truly possible, whereas we can only catch a glimpse of it with human friendships. And God's relationship with us transcends gender, age, race. It is available to each of us, whether or not we are good at forming deep friendships with others. We can count on it in a way that we can never count on fallen human relationships, because no human has the power to know us as God knows us.

God has this relationship with us not only because he is able to, but

II. Because he has the right (v. 13-16)

God has the right to know us so well because he is our creator. We know from Genesis that God was a creator in the general sense, because he made the first man and woman. But we tend to forget that God is still intimately involved in the creation of EACH PERSON'S life. Look at verse 13:

**“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 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.**

God is involved with us from the moment of conception. This psalm must have created some consternation among the Jewish rabbis, since a common Jewish belief was that life occurred at “inspiration” or upon the drawing of breath at birth. Others believed that life occurred at “quickening”, or time when the mother could first feel the fetus. But here, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, David tells us that life begins at conception, and that God is performing on a tiny, individual scale the same work of creation that he undertook on a large scale in Genesis.

When David speaks of the “secret place” and the “depths of the earth” he is talking about the mother's womb – a place so dark and secret that not even the mother may realize for some time that she is carrying a new life. And God broods over this whole process: **“your eyes saw my unformed body”**.

In recent years this psalm has been a rallying cry for those who oppose abortion, and rightly so. But the care of God carries through from conception through death and beyond. It means that we must be careful not only of the unborn, but at the other end – the dying. Both abortion and euthanasia are trying to trespass on God's sovereign right of giving life and death.

It is an important truth to know that all the days ordained for me were written in God's book **“before one of them came to be.”** I cannot tell you how grateful I was to read in God's word that he had specifically ordained the 479 days of our daughter Kirstie's life. That her death, which was so sudden and seemingly untimely, did not occur because of a cruel twist of fate, but rather, was known to God before it ever happened. Only he knew from the moment of her conception that her life on this earth would be brief and joy-filled. How liberating, to a parent who's lost a child.

And how comforting, again, when another of our children struggled with suicidal impulses, to know that God had ordained a specific number of days, and that human action was not going to shorten or circumvent that purpose for that person.

Now what does this mean for those who struggle in the wake of a loved one's suicide, or with the aftermath of abortion? It means that God is aware of what's going on at all times. That none of these actions occur outside of his knowledge or because he was not paying attention. Rather, in his permissive will, he allows certain human freedoms, always weaving the consequences back into his central purpose for all mankind. And we need to remember that when God ordains all our days, those days include the ones we cannot yet see that take place in eternity with him.

It's obvious when God is sovereign in the taking of life, as we experienced with our daughter Kirstie. But if we only had eyes to see, think how often we might see God's hand giving life, or thwarting death, when it should have carried someone off. I've had the occasional sense of this process occurring just outside of my conscious knowledge – as if God's invisible hand intervened in what should have happened. One time Emily fell head down into a deep, waterfilled bathtub when I was downstairs, and her brother caught her legs and yelled for me. She was 18 months; he was almost 3. Nick had meningitis at 6 weeks old. Hannah was nearly hit by a car in England one year. Emily was on the rope swing in our big oak tree when the branch broke, throwing her to the ground. Nick cut a small artery making cookies. On one level, these are just commonplace childhood accidents that children usually live through. But having watched one child not live through a fall which others have survived, I have a keen sense of God's hand at work in the outcome. We should recognize that he gives life as often as he takes it.

So if our eyes, like David's, are open to see it, we will know that God works out his purposes regardless of how the outcome seems to the participants.

So God desires to know us and to be known by us, because he able to, because he has the right to as our creator, and also because

III. Because he has knowledge of good and evil (v. 17-22)

Look at v. 17:

**“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.**

David is comforted by the fact that God's thoughts are so much more infinite than his own. A God who can think on this scale is able to plan for the future – is able to take worry off one's shoulders. As Solomon wrote in Ecclesiastes 3:10: **“He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.”** We are made in the image of God, and we are able to think, on a finite level, about what God thinks on an infinite level. This explains why we hit a barrier in what we can understand about God. However, rather than being frustrated, David takes joy in God's ability to outthink him and makes precious those thoughts of God's that he can grasp.

“When I awake, I am still with you.” David might have just been lying on his bed meditating on God, dropped off, then waking up with similar thoughts. I must admit, this is a real feature of my spiritual life. But David might also have been referring to the sleep of death – when he awakes, he will be with God forever.

But in the midst of these loving, God-centered thoughts comes what appears to be a rough intrusion:

**If only you would slay the wicked, O God!
Away from me, you bloodthirsty men!
They speak of you with evil intent;
Your adversaries misuse your name.
Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord,
And abhor those who rise up against you?
I have nothing but hatred for them;
I count them my enemies.” (v. 17-22)**

On the one hand, this could be just a continuation of David’s train of thought. While he muses on God, he also has to contend with enemies, and because David has allied himself so closely with God, his enemies are also God’s enemies. C.S. Lewis says that David blurts this out v. 17, “as if it were surprising that such a simple remedy for human ills had not occurred to the Almighty”. Why don’t you just slay them, God? But it’s a good thing that he gives his enemies time to repent, because, you see, we were once enemies of God, and he was merciful to us. The time may come when these enemies become God’s followers. Again, God sees the large pattern. We only see the immediate.

So God desires to know us and to be known by us, not just because he is able to, or because he has the right to, but because he has the knowledge of good and evil to see the big picture – and that gives him a much better perspective than us on how to direct our lives. There is one final reason for us to rely on God’s knowledge:

IV. Because he holds the future (v. 23-24)

**“Search me, O 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.” (v. 23-24)**

As David thinks about the enemies of God, he suddenly realizes that there might be something in him that is offensive – something that would cause God to look on him as an enemy. And perhaps he even remembers the specific time when his sin put him at odds with God. So he prays a brave prayer: **Search me, O God, and know my heart.** Although we understand on a rational level that God does this all the time, I believe there is a difference of outcome when we ASK God to take this step. Because, much as happens when we visit a doctor, we are asking God not just to assess the condition but to take steps to cure it. Our willingness opens the door to a cure and a permanent change.

But it also points out a wonderful byproduct of thinking about God’s standards. Instead of just fretting about how other people fall short, it helps us change. David, writing hundreds of years

ahead of Christ, can only look forward to the coming reconciliation between God and man. He asks God to **“lead me in the way everlasting.”** But it is only in Christ that we find the everlasting way – the way, the truth and the life. That is the only way to truly know God.

So let’s look back for a moment over the whole psalm. Simply by understanding who God is and what is he like, we now have answers for some really big life questions:

1. Why did this happen to me? Many of us struggle with some catastrophic life event, or even a cherished dream which never reaches completion. How many have longed to be married, or have children, or pursue some career which has never panned out? But if we understand that God is able to orchestrate our lives, that he has the right to do so as our creator, that he has knowledge of good and evil and the future, and therefore can see what we cannot see coming, then it becomes easier to accept an outcome which we didn’t want when we have to let go of some cherished dream.

2. Why do bad things happen in the world? Maybe I’m doing fine but feel overwhelmed by the sin and tragedy in others’ lives. But when we understand who God is, it’s easier to accept that we are only seeing a very small part of an infinite picture. We see that he has the right to shape us by whatever means he chooses, as our creator. Jeremiah describes mankind as a lump of clay in the potter’s hand, who makes of it whatever he chooses. And how are clay pots made strong? They have to be fired at a very hot temperature. Being in the oven isn’t pleasant, but it does make us finished and strong. So in seeing God as our sovereign creator we acknowledge his right to shape us by whatever means he chooses.

3. If God’s in charge of everything, what can I do about my life? David quickly found out that his life improved when he followed God. **“Do not cast me from your presence, or take your Holy Spirit from me,”** David cries in Psalm 51 after he sinned. But when his conscience is clean, he writes, **“I lie down and sleep; I wake again, because the Lord sustains me. I will not fear the tens of thousands drawn up against me on every side.” (Psalm 3:5-6)**

In fact, we can probably illustrate this best by returning to the story of Pippin, the errant puppy. If Pippin wants to be the boss of her own life, she quickly finds out that her freedom is more and more restricted. Because, you see, Pippin does not have very good judgment. She chases cars, goes bounding up to fierce German shepherds, befriends every stranger. Pippin would follow scents for miles, and not know how to get back home. So she ends up leashed or in her crate. But if Pippin is willing to remain within the sound of our voices, she can have complete freedom to run within her boundaries. And, after all, that’s how the writer of Psalm 119 put it: **“I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free.” (Psalm 119:32).** It seems to me that if your heart is free, and you can run, there is really nothing more we could want.