

A PSALM OF INTIMACY

Psalm 139

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The psalm we're looking at this morning is a psalm which speaks about God knowing us. God has us tagged. He knows us far better than we know ourselves. But unlike an animal, we can know ourselves. That's the great liberating thing about the way God made us, in contrast with the animals—that we can have a knowledge of self that goes along with the knowledge of God.

When we begin to seek, this psalm is saying, “How completely God knows us then we're really free to be ourselves.”

Psalm 139 basically answers three questions: “How well does God know me?” in verses 1–6.

The response, in summary form, is that God is omniscient. He's all-knowing. But that all-knowingness of God is not something abstract. It's very real, as it pertains to me. He is not simply all-knowing of everything in the universe. He's all knowing of everything in me, in my universe.

The second question this psalm seeks to answer is, “How near is God to me?” in verses 7–12.

That speaks of God's omnipresence. His ever-presentness with us. Not that God is ever-present in His universe at one time, but God is also present with me everywhere. There's no way I can escape Him.

The third question is, “How involved is God with me?” Here the psalmist comes back the creative power of God in our life.

We'll look at these questions, each in turn, and the answers that Psalm 139 provides us, in looking at our intimate relationship with God and the concept of self that is given to us there.

I. How well does God know me?

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“O LORD, you have searched me and you know me” (Psalm 139:1, NIV). In the word “searched,” the literal Hebrew can read “to dig.” “Search” has the idea of “digging” to it. So, in a modern translation, we might well say of verse 1, “Lord, you dig me!” to use the teenage version here.

The Lord digs into me. The result of the Lord’s digging into me, is that He knows me. There are some things that God knows about us.

A. He knows our routines. “You know when I sit and when I rise” (Psalm 139:2, NIV). Sitting down and rising up are basically routine, aren’t they? There’s never been a day in my life when I’ve counted the number of times I sat down and rose up. The beautiful point of this psalm is that God knows us so intimately that he is aware of our routines and that, if you ask Him, “How many times did I sit down or rise up today?” He could give you an answer that you could not even provide yourself.

B. The second way he knows us is he knows our thoughts. “You perceive my thoughts from afar” (verse 2, NIV). People who live with us for any degree of time or are around us, begin to know pretty much how we think.

This is saying that God has access to me from afar. “You know me from afar.” God has both the awareness of my conscious thoughts and my subconscious thoughts. And He can plumb into me from His distance, apart from me, in a way I cannot plumb into myself. God knows me. God has access to the deepest levels of my being. Some of which I may be out of touch with. He knows my thoughts from afar.

C. The third way that God knows us is: He knows my directions and choices. “You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways” (verse 3, NIV). The going out, seems to me, indicates the sorts of directive choices we make in life. When we go out, we

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generally know where we're going when we head out the door. And in those moments of rest in our life, He intimately knows me.

D. Fourth, He knows my speech. "Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD" (verse 4, NIV).

He knows everything about us. "You hem me in—behind and before; you have laid your hand upon me" (verse 5, NIV). In other words, God's got us trapped. How do we respond to this kind of knowledge? The psalmist says that there are two ways to respond to it.

One is, "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain" (verse 6, NIV). That is wonderful! It's wonderful to think that God knows this much about me, that I am important to God, that He would track me this way. To realize that God is personal to me and not some abstract force or being out there, floating somewhere. He's real and he's personal. The idea is so vast and grand, I can't figure it out. I'm lost in wonder, love and praise, to think that God thinks so much of me and knows me so well.

It's neat when an important person remembers your name or remembers something about you.

The second response the psalmist has is, "Such knowledge is awful." There are times I don't want you to know things about me. I don't want you to know where I'm going or what I'm thinking or what I'm saying. It's awful. If God knows everything about me, I want to split!

That's in verses 7–12. The psalmist wants to split. He's like Adam and Eve in the Garden. God's knowledge of them was wonderful until they sinned, then they had to hide.

The psalmist thinks about splitting.

II. When he thinks about splitting, he has to answer the question then: Can I get away from God? How near is God to me?

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God knows me well, but how near is God to me? Lord, is there anywhere I can get away from you? He quickly realizes, “Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?” (Psalm 139:7, NIV). The first alternative is to get up in the heights. “If I go up to the heavens, you are there” (verse 8, NIV). In other words, he cannot escape from God by ascending. He says that if he goes in the opposite direction, “If I make my bed in the depths, you are there.” God is with me in the depths. Here the word is the Old Testament word “*Sheol*” which means “place of the dead.” Many of the Old Testament saints didn’t have a good idea of what went on in the place of the dead. Many of the Old Testament saints didn’t have a great vision of what was happening after death. It was fogged in. The reality was there. The Resurrection was there. They just didn’t see it. He says, “If I go to death, you’re there.” Saint Paul would later say, “To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:8). God is with us in the depths.

He is with us in the distance. “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” (Psalm 139:9–10, NIV). The King James says “wings of the morning.” It’s an expression meaning “from one end of the horizon to the other.”

The psalmist also says that God is with us in the darkness. “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” (Psalm 139:11–12, NIV). Darkness, even for adults, can even be a very scary experience. If I could hide in the darkness of the evening, yet you would find me. Darkness is as light to you.

Basically, he’s saying in these verses, “I cannot escape you.” How near is God to me? I cannot escape him. That’s how near he is to me.

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III. The third question the psalmist addresses for us is: “How involved is God with me?”

If God knows me and God’s with me, what is my reason for saying that? The reason why the psalmist can say confidently that God knows me and God is with me is the fact that, from his own experience, he knows that God has created him and made his frame. God has been with him—and with you and with me—from the moment of his conception. “For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb” (Psalm 139:13, NIV). The word “knit” can also be translated “embroidered.” It describes the intricate work of God in the creative process. “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 [womb], 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! Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand. When I awake, I am still with you” (Psalm 139:14–18, NIV).

Verses 13–15 say that God wrought us in the womb, in the depths of the earth. Therefore, let no one think they are unwanted or not special, because God’s eyes beheld my unformed substance—the impersonal collection of cells. God, in His majesty, beheld my being when it was yet unformed, when it was simply a collection of cells. He saw, in this being, the formation of it all coming together—when I was yet unformed. “All this knowledge is precious,” the psalmist indicates. Therefore, since God has been with me from the moment of conception, He is not going to leave his work in me to chance. He is not going to leave his work in me up to extinction. Instead, when I think of Him, how vast are his thoughts toward me. I cannot count the sum of them all.

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Not only is God with us in the past, but he's with us in the future sense. "All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be." This may relate to the fact that, biologically, God knows how the unformed substance is going to become a body. It may also reflect on the fact that God really does know all of our ways and all of our patterning. There is no way an inhibition on our personal freedom, but it is a clear statement, from the Scripture and the psalms, that God really, truly knows us.

How precious is this to us? I say this especially to those of us here today who may be wrestling with the thought that you're not important or you were a mistake. You happened because of a mistake. You come from an experience where you have not felt loved or wanted. This psalm is an unequivocal declarative statement of the fact that God has planned for you, God has wanted you, God has designed you. God has affirmed you and you're in his presence.

IV. The psalmist, in responding to all this, gives a concluding prayer (verses 19–24).

He prays that God would do something about evil. This is the thing which destroys the close relationship with God. He prays that God would do two things about evil: He prays that God would do something about the evil that was around him; then he prays that God would do something about the evil that was in him.

When you read the psalms, you need to understand that not everything in a psalm is a reflection of God's will. The psalms are hymns of praises and prayers to God. Some of which may reflect spiritual immaturity. Inspired? Yes. Completely authoritative? Yes, in that they reflect what the person was going through. But Christ teaches us a better model—of loving our enemies and praying for them.

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The psalmist has confused hatred for sin with hatred for the sinner. He has a very easy solution for the problem of the evil that would interrupt relationship with God. “Kill everybody that’s evil.” At least he calls upon God to act and doesn’t volunteer to do it himself!

More realistically, he realizes that evil is a matter within him. So the psalm, in verses 23–24, asks God to do something about the evil within him, which God is very pleased to do. “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” (NIV). God cannot have access to us, in the sense of searching us, without our invitation. Yes, he knows about us. But he asks for the personal invitation that we give him. When we allow Him to come into our lives, in a searching sense—a different kind of search than simply his knowledge about us. It’s the knowledge that then begins to heal and redeem and give us hope and life.

Closing Prayer

So we say to the Lord, “Come into every nook and cranny and corner of my life. Search me, O God, and know me and heal me of the wickedness in my own life that would separate me from Your presence. Help me to rejoice in the wonderful knowledge You have of me, in the wonderful presence that You surround me with. Help me to rejoice in the knowledge that You are creating me and You are not going to let what You have created sleep in the extinction of dust and death. But You will raise us in power and glory.”