

## A PSALM OF INTIMACY

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Psalms 139 begins “O Lord, you have searched me and you know me.”

Someone said to be yesterday, Pastor we miss your dog stories. You used to tell stories about your dogs all the time.” In our marriage we’ve had two dogs. Boomer who was with us from soon after we were married until he died at the age of 12. He was a character in his own right. A rich personality. A marvelously evil, mischievous, loving dog. Now we have Sunshine. The reason I don’t talk about him is that while he has the color of my hair he is basically a colorless dog except for his nasty disposition. I suffer him out of my wife’s love for him. If any of you are interested in adopting a dog, I’ll make it a serious matter of prayer.

We have never gotten Sunshine his own dog tag. We thought it cheaper to just use Boomer’s dog tag. We have not moved and our phone number has not changed. We thought if a person finds Sunshine on the street if he gets out he doesn’t know if he’s Sunshine or Boomer. He’ll respond to a kind tone of voice and nothing is lost. So unknowingly he wears Boomer’s tag. We know Sunshine. But psychologically Sunshine does not know himself – no self concept. He does not know who he is.

Here is a psalm which talks about God knowing us. He knows us better than we know ourselves just like we know our dog better than he knows himself. But the difference is unlike Sunshine we can know ourselves. Nobody can put a tag around us that has somebody else’s name. We know our name. We know who we are. We may not know everything we are. But we have a vague idea of who we are.

This psalm is telling us that when we begin to understand how completely God knows us we become free to be ourselves. And the knowledge of how intimately God knows us is a tremendously releasing thing in our own life. Since he knows us so well it allows us to bask in his acceptance of us and allows us to find the identity which he has especially created us for.

This beautiful psalm – one of the great psalms in the psalter – seeks to answer three questions: How well does God know me? That’s the focus of verses 1-6. The attribute of God that we look at as an answer to that question is God’s omniscience – his all knowingness.

The second question, found in verses 7-12 is, How near is God to me? The answer to that is found in the omnipresence of God. He is everywhere present with me.

The third question is, How involved is God with me? How involved is God with my life? Verses 13-18. The answer to that talks about the creative power of God in our life.

Then the psalm appropriately closes with a prayer where we ask the Lord to do something about evil externally in the world and internally within us.

How well does God know me?

“Oh Lord, you have searched me...” That word “You have searched me” comes before “you know me.” The reason why the psalmist is able to say God knows me is that he has searched me. I understand that the word for “searched” in Hebrew, a language I do not work with – I depend

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upon others who work with the Hebrew text. This word in the Hebrew means “to dig.” To discover by digging. To unearth. The Lord digs into me. As a result of his digging, he knows me.

What does he know about me? First he knows my routine. “You know when I set and when I rise.” That is a routine and it’s a fairly dull routine at that. Yet the psalmist is saying God knows me so well that he knows even that routine. Out of the 43 years of my life there has never been a day when I counted how many times I sat down and how many times I got up. I knew I was going to preach this message and I meant to calculate how many times I got up and sat down in a day. The psalmist right away is saying, Lord, you know me so well you have count on my rising up and my lying down.

He not only knows my routines, my habitual patterns but he knows my thoughts. “You perceive my thoughts from afar.” Lord, you can be physically a long way off from me but you know me and my thinking intimately well. There are people who know us casually, who know us by name or know us by some attributes in our personality but may not know how we characteristically think. People who have been with me for a while however know how I think.

Jewel tells me she can always tell what I’m thinking by looking in my face. It’s a dead give away. Yet there are other times interestingly enough where she says, I don’t understand you at all.

The psalmist says God has access to me even from afar. I take this to mean that the Lord has access to my conscious life and my subconscious life. To my rationality and to my day dreaming. To the parts of my thought life and meditative life that are inaccessible to every one else, even the nearest and the dearest. Accessible only to me. And not only that. He knows about me things that I do not even know about myself. He knows my thoughts.

He knows my routines, he knows my thoughts.

He knows me well enough that he knows my directions and choices. “You discern my going out and my lying down. You are familiar with all my ways.” You know how I awaken in the morning. You know how programmed I am about my day. You know how I will respond to certain kinds of things. You know how I relate to pressure. You know how I relate to bad news. You know what predictable things I do when I am depressed. You know how I respond when I am happy. You really know the directions and choices I’m making.

The Lord knows my speech – the fourth thing he knows about me. “Before a word is on my tongue, you know it completely.” And if that isn’t enough the fifth thing that the psalmist says about us is he knows everything about us. “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 to attain.” He says the Lord has hemmed me in. That is there is no part of me that is outside of his corral. It’s the image of livestock that are being kept within an arrangement of posts and fences. You’ve hemmed me in. I can’t jump your borders. There’s no part of me that can spill over that you won’t have access to – thought wise, action wise, speech wise, routine wise. It’s all within the border of your knowledge. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me.

“Lord, you have an enormous file on me. Your informers report all my movements and you know what armchair, what theater seat, what office stool I set on. How I respond to my alarm

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clock and early cup of tea. The path I follow to the factory, swimming pool or church. You even have bugging devices to record my thoughts. You have Photostats of all my air tickets, expense accounts and hotel bookings. You have on tape everything I say in public and in private.”

How do we respond to that kind of knowledge? The psalmist says such knowledge is wonderful, too wonderful for me to think that I am that important to God. God is so personally involved in my life that he would take the time to know that. When we come to the teaching of Jesus and he talks about the fact that he who knows when a bird falls to the ground is aware surely of us. It isn't as though God's mind is some great computer that flashes on the screen “Bird number X has just fallen to the earth in sector X of earth.” But it's personalized and God knows me personally. I can't figure it out. I can't do anything but be in awe at the creator and redeemer who knows me well enough to let nothing about me be outside his corral.

It's wonderful when people know us. I have trouble with names. I struggle. It's wonderful to be known.

Such knowledge is also awful. If God knows that much about me it's going to make me a little uncomfortable. Doesn't it you? It made Adam and Eve uncomfortable. They wanted to hide.

Maybe that's a little bit how the psalmist feels. On the one hand wonderful and on the other hand such knowledge is too lofty to attain. It blows me away that God would know me that well. Every one of us in this room are known that well to God. There's not a single one of us who knows everybody else. But God knows every one of us. Not just by name and file card. But he knows us all intimately. How well does God know me? He knows me.

The second question that this psalm answers is how near is God to me? Lord, is there any where I can get away from you? So the psalmist starts to probe that. He comes to conclusion first of all that God is with him in the heights. “Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?” This knowledge of God makes us want to flee. Who wants to be in the presence of someone who has a file on you and knows everything about you? All your weaknesses and sins and secret thoughts. I want to flee. Where can I go? “If I go up to the heavens you are there.” The Lord is with me in the heights. This is written before the age of airplanes, skydiving, anything mechanical you can get up in the air. The highest you could get in the air would be to climb a mountain. He couldn't get up there. “But if I could get up there I couldn't escape from you there.” If I go to the heights he is there.

The psalmist says he's not only with me if I go to the heights but if I go to the depths. The word in the Hebrew is *sheol* which was used in biblical days for the place of the dead. In the Old Testament many times when we read it we realize that the patriarchs and prophets did not have a very clear idea of what happens after death except that we go to be with our fathers. Because the resurrection hadn't happened yet people didn't see clearly. They had sort of broad features of the outline and didn't see more sharply than that. But even down in the depths there is the reality of God's eternity there.

If I go up or if I go down I can't get away from him.

What about if I go far away. The psalmist considers that. “If I go to the distance. If I rise on the wings of the dawn or if I settle on the far side of the sea...” What he's saying poetically is if I

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travel the distance of the sun from its rising in the morning in the east to the setting in a far country in the west, if I could span the heavens, if I could go and settle in the land where the sun rises or where it sets I still cannot get away from God. He is from one span of the horizon to the other.

Maybe I could hide from him. “Perhaps the darkness would cover me. Even the darkness will be not dark to you. The night will shine like the day for darkness is as light to you.” As a child I was desperately afraid of the dark. But the darkness is not dark to the Lord. It is light.

The psalmist is talking of course about a physical darkness. More than just physical darkness he’s also talking about the spiritual darkness that may settle upon our hearts. Where we are out of context with God and others. We are lost in our world. In that darkness am I really undiscovered, unknown to God? No. He knows where I am.

The psalmist says the darkness be as light to you. Can you be with me, Lord, where I go? Are you present everywhere to me? And the answer is yes. There is no place I can be – in the pit of despond, in terrible financial distress and danger, in marital discord, in personal disorientation, in illness, away from family – wherever I am Lord, you’re there. You know me.

This leaves rise to the third question of the psalm: how involved is God with me in my life? Verses 13-18. David uses beautiful language to describe the involvement of God in his own personal creation. Here he’s not concerned with the creation of the world. But his own personal creation. “For you created my inmost being, you knit me together in my mother’s womb.” The word for “knit” in the Hebrew is a word which can describe something beautifully embroidered. A delicate work of embroidery. God, you knit me together.

And I praise you because “I’m fearfully and wonderfully made.” This is in the days before they had the ability to take photographs of the development of the child in the womb. And the beginning of life which is so glorious. “I praise you because I’m fearfully and wonderfully made. Your works are wonderful. I know that full well for 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. [Here he’s using the theological model that God first took clay so in the womb he’s transplanting that imagery out of Genesis about God making us from the clay] your eyes saw my unformed body. All my days were written in your book before any of them came to be.”

Lord, how involved are you with me? You knit me together. When it all started, when the ovum and the sperm came together to make the fertilized egg, you were there.

Carl Olsen has an article “What is Man?” He says something very profound about conception: “In conception a human sperm and a human ovum unite. In that union the payload is a data system containing the entire program of possibilities for the spiritual, intellectual, psychic and spiritual life of a human being. According to the best estimates that data system has no less than ten billion pieces of information, ten billion separate entries. If printed out this information would need at least a thousand volumes of 500 pages each. Or bookshelves enough to contain the information in conception that would stretch 7 feet high, and 18 feet across. That much information. That whole data system, that library of information with its billions of complex interrelated messages is contained in so minute a space that it is invisible to any except the most sensitive electron microscopes. The naked eye can detect an object one tenth of one millimeter. But the space I’m speaking of is only one fiftieth millimeter in diameter. From this infinitely

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small data system the mystery of human existence is spelled out second after second and day after day until the person's destiny has been fulfilled.”

Lord you know me.

These verses are saying God has been back of us in time, assuring our identity. He has allowed to stream into us from past generations and millennia our capacities, our traits, our characteristics. The data was there in the conception.

Let no one think that they're unwanted or not special. God's eyes beheld your and my unformed substance. That impersonal collection of cells rolled up in the embryonic state he beheld. God has been with us in the womb. Because he has been with us in the womb we can be certain that he is with us in life.

All of this knowledge is precious. God is not going to leave his work in me to chance or to extinction. When therefore I am cast down and feel that my life is not important to God I'm assured that God has a plan for me. All my days were ordained. We don't take this from a Calvinistic position that everything was fated. But we take it from the fact that God has created scriptures for us that give us psychological security and let us know how important we are to God. Rather than the scripture trying to communicate to us that we are predetermined and have no will of our own, what the scriptures are trying to do is in the midst of our confusions in life which we go through to let us know that there is a sure hand upon our life. God, who so delicately planned and formed us has glorious intentions for us. His plans for us are not for evil but for good. To give a purpose and a hope.

Lord, you are involved in the creation of my physical life. You're involved by transference in the creation of my spiritual life in the new birth through Christ which is incredibly more complex than the physical birth. You are with me every step.

The psalmist having been assured of the intimacy of God with him closes with a prayer. The prayer seems to shatter the psalm that is ready to conclude. Verses 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 the sand. When I am awake I am still with you.” We say, Amen. The psalm's over. Thank God. Then the tranquility of the psalm seems to be shattered with the next breath. Altogether seemingly out of place. “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 those who rise up against you, I have nothing but hatred for them. I count them my enemies. Praise God.”

What's the psalmist doing? After he's considered the complex involvement of God with him he's looked around and said, Lord, there's other people they don't seem to appreciate what you're doing for them. They don't seem to realize how involved you are with their life and they're doing wrong things. So, in your name, Lord, kill them all. They're vexation to my spirit. Blot them out.

David here almost seems to be the Ayatollah. We look at that psalm and say, that is an unchristian prayer. And it is. One of the things you have to learn about the psalms is that there are parts of the psalms called imprecatory – where the psalmist is asking God to judge somebody and the language is so strange it seems off the wall vindictive. It's strange to the words of Jesus,

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Forgive them for they know not what they do. Bonhoeffer says that in our prayers God lets us pray exactly how we feel. Simply because something is in a psalm doesn't mean that God approves the language. It means that he's let us pray as we really feel. The psalm is the true reflection with how the psalmist feels. He needs better education about the character of God.

The second thing Bonhoeffer says is when we come to the imprecatory psalms the only one who is worthy to pray in that kind of language is the Lord himself. He's the only one whose motivations and character aren't singed by sin and therefore can execute justice righteously which we could never do.

What the psalmist confuses is hatred for sin with hatred for the sinner. He sees an easy solution to the problem with evil. Just wipe all the evil people out and all will be taken care of. But God chooses not to do things that way. At least David calls upon God to act and doesn't volunteer to do the work of slaying for God.

It's almost then that he realizes that he's been a little off base. He comes back to himself. He prays now that God will not just do something about the evil around him and outside of him. But he prays now that the Lord will do something about the evil in himself. "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." When we pray that God will do something to others, the Holy Spirit prompts us and says what about yourself?

At the beginning of the psalm, David has said, Lord, you have searched me. God has access to David and to us without our asking. But at the close of the psalm he is asking God to search him. "I know you've had access to me without my asking but now I give you permission. Search me and know me. If there's anything offensive in me, anything that offends you, anything that offends someone else, any evil in me, then take it out. Lead me in the way everlasting."

Back to the paraphrase of this entire psalm:

Lord, you have an enormous file on me, your informers report all my movements and you know what armchair, what theater seat, what office stool I set on. How I respond to my alarm clock and early cup of tea. The path I follow to the factory, swimming pool or church. You even have bugging devices to record my thoughts. You have Photostats of all my air tickets, expense accounts and hotel bookings. You have on tape everything I say in public and in private. You created me and you sustain me to the last detail. Lord, I don't know how you do it. I am astounded by your incredibly detailed knowledge and I cannot begin to compete with your efficiency. However un-recollected I may be about you and I'm often very un-recollected, both in my prayers and outside of them. You are always recollected about me. At first I found your knowledge about me to be paralyzing rather than liberating. Your eye, you as the divine voyeur terrified me. How dare I speak or act when the expert was watching me. So my first reaction was a desire to escape from this surveillance. Though I know that your wonderful and excellent closeness to me was in my own best interest. I came to thank you for it and the way that it brings to fruition whatever good seeds you have planted in me. In any case, it is futile to want to escape because I could not do that if I tried. If I climb up into heaven in prayer, in friendship, in relaxation you are there in love. When I'm in the hell of sin and rebellion in a place so unclean that I should not have expected to find you in it, you are there in judgment. If I take the morning jet and fly to the most distant spot in the world or to the frontiers of faith and suffering you meet

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me there and hold me fast. For your love has no limits. When the night closes around me and the darkness spills over me, the darkness of criticism, failure, pain and death, that darkness will become bright as day because darkness and light are both under your control. You are the light of the world. Realizing your closeness to me I turn to you in penitence certainly. But also in trust. Your care of me is shown by creation for which you are personally responsible. By the miracle of my existence which began when I conceived in your thought eons before I was conceived in my mother's womb. Your counsels, your thoughts are precious to me. Although often I do not understand them for your thoughts divine thinker, are higher than my thoughts. You would not have created me if you had not loved me. I know that I am not an unwanted child. So I can approach you with confidence. Lord, I hate evil because it is done before your eyes and it is offensive to you. I pray that evil may be overcome and I may take my share in overcoming it. But I do not say this imagining that I too am already perfect. I know that there is evil in me too. I am ready to face up to your audit however painful it may be. If I am on the wrong lines I trust that you will put me straight and renew me in such a way that I may find happiness in the integrity which you have given me. Lord, above all lead me in the way that leads to eternal life. O Lord, you have searched me and you know me.

Father, thank you for that truth. Thank you that you know all about us, that you have hemmed us in and there is no where we can go from you. And that you are dynamically involved in our life. That you created us in your mind eons before we were created in our mother's womb. And you who have given such thought to our creation have given also such great thought and action to our redemption. And to our completion when we will one day stand before you. We're grateful that we are related to you in this personal bond. God of all the universe we give you thanks.

[end of tape]