

Psalm 139 - Doncaster – 30/12/18 – by Daniel James

How was your Christmas? Did you all enjoy it? The food, the presents, the fun, the time off work? For many people, having the family together is the best thing about Christmas. Spending time with people who know you and love you is, for some, the total highlight of the festive period.

But for others – that is the worst part. For many people, they feel like their family DON'T really know them, so they don't really feel comfortable around them. They can't be themselves or whatever. A lot of people spend a lot of time longing to find just that - someone who knows them. Being known, properly known, is a huge desire for people today. "No one really knows me" is a common cry of the lonely. Not being known and loneliness is a horrible feeling. But then perhaps being known TOO well might also be pretty horrible and scary. It all depends, I guess, on your relationship with the person who knows you.

I have a friend who was at Cambridge University in the early 90s, and at the end of his degree was asked to attend an interview for a job for the secret service – a job he hadn't applied for – here . MI5 had contacted them directly. He didn't go for the interview, but a friend of his did. This friend went along to the interview in London and when she got there, someone important eventually sat across a desk from her and asked her if she had any questions before they began. She had 1 big question! Why had they invited her to an interview when she hadn't applied for a job and they knew nothing about her?! The gentleman behind the desk pulled out a huge pile of papers, placed them on the table between them and said "We know everything about you." What an unnerving situation! Now, to an extent - they did know everything about her! But they only knew facts about her. It's possible to know a lot about someone and not KNOW them.

However, the Psalm we read tonight, Psalm 139, is all about how well God knows us. David, the writer of the Psalm, makes this clear by stating it at the start of the Psalm, (V1 – "You have searched me, Lord, and you know me.) and at the end of the Psalm (v23 "Search me, God, and know my heart"). The theme of all the poetry that comes in between is exactly that - God knows you in a deep, deep way.

And as this is poetry there's a little poetic license and poetic language here. David knows that God doesn't need to do any actual searching of us to know us. He knows all things, he doesn't need to go looking for knowledge about you that he doesn't already have. But David is trying to show that God knows us with the intimacy and knowledge of someone who has searched into the most secret corners of our being. God knows us. And what David wants to try and express here is just how well God knows us.

So, we're going to see just how well God knows us this evening, and then how we might respond to that knowing.

1 – God knows everything we do v2-6

When I was a teenager, I was a massive Manchester Utd fanboy. That group of players: I knew everything about. I could tell you scores, scorers, statistics, even attendance figures. BBC QUIZ LAST WEEK. I would talk about them like a lot of people talk about sports teams: "WE played really well today" etc, but I didn't know them. I didn't have a personal knowledge of even one member of that squad. Thankfully, that is NOT the way that God knows you and me. The pronouns here show that God's knowledge of us is intensely **personal** and deep.

David begins by showing us that God knows everything we do. So, v2, he knows when we sit and when we rise, V3 - he knows when we go out and when we lie down – meaning, he knows when we rest and when we move – **and** everything in between. When David uses extremes like these – as he does often in this Psalm – he's also including everything on the spectrum between those 2 extremes. So here – he's making the point - God knows everything we do!

He also knows everything we say. Before a word is on our tongues – he knows it! Have you ever snapped and said something and immediately thought “No!! Come back words...!” I know I have in the heat of moments. But those words don’t surprise God. Why not? Because he also knows our thoughts. In fact, he perceives them from afar! That word “afar” can mean both a long distance away, and a long time away – and both are true. God knows your thoughts. You never have a private moment or thought away from him. Nothing you can do or say or even think is hidden from him. He sees them all – both the God glorifying thoughts that no-one else sees, and you maybe wish they did - but also those thoughts you hate yourself for even having and hope no one ever knows. He sees them all.

So... how does that make you feel? Does it make you feel a bit... frustrated? Claustrophobic? That’s certainly a little of how David felt. V5 “*You hem me in behind and before, and you lay your hand upon me.*” The phrase “Hem me in” can mean two things – It can be talking about the certainty David has of God’s presence of care and protection for him, but it can also mean that feeling of never being able to escape from it. Similarly, the phrase “you lay your hand on me” can mean 2 things – it can mean God’s hand blessing him, or it can mean God’s hand disciplining him.

How should the fact that God knows you completely make you feel? The truth is that any understanding of how well God knows us can lead us to 2 different responses - Comfort and fear. So, should we be afraid of this God who knows us so intimately? Well... only if we’re guilty of wrongdoing. However, when we realise that he knows us, has always known every single thing about us, including the deepest, darkest secrets we keep from everyone else, and has still loved us and shown it by giving up his only son to save us... well that should lead us to unending praise of this awesome, gracious God.

So how does the fact that God knows you completely make you feel? It all depends on the current status of your relationship with the God who knows everything we do.

But let’s see secondly

2- God is with us everywhere v7-12

Verse 7 begins with rhetorical questions: “*Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?*” The answer is...? Nowhere! There is nowhere in all of creation where someone can go to hide from God – and that’s what the Psalmist wants to show now. David again uses 2 extremes to show this - so he says in v8 : “*If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.*” Up and down. The highest of heights and the deepest of depths. And everywhere in between.

In the last few years we’ve had some pretty amazing explorations haven’t we? Explorations that have shown the scope of the size of the planet and our solar system. A few years ago, the film director James Cameron travelled in a tiny submarine thing to depths of the Mariana Trench in the Pacific Ocean. To give the trench some scale – if we were to drop Mount Everest into it, the peak of the mountain would still be over a mile below sea level. And then in February this year, the Billionaire “Elon Musk” fired a car into space to try and understand Mars a little better. And yet the Psalmist says that even if you were to be able to travel as far as Pluto and beyond to the far reaches of the universe, or burrow down to the very core of the earth – nowhere would be away from the presence of God. Nowhere up, and nowhere down. And everywhere in between.

So what about other directions? v9 “*If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea...*” ‘The wings of the dawn’ is a way of talking about the morning sun shining from the East. And the phrase ‘The far side of the sea’, well the nearest sea to Israel was the Mediterranean Sea – to the West of the country. Would travelling across the sea get you away from God? Just ask

Jonah. Whether you travel East or West – wherever you're going – V10 – *“even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.”*

So maybe you can hide from him where you are? Every year, Jamie, Aoife and I go with Mum and Dad to Whitby for the weekend, and the us 3 were sharing a bedroom. And at night, that room was pitch black. Completely black. And, of course, a year ago, Aoife had a nightmare and threw up, and in the pitch-black confusion of an unfamiliar bedroom, it was really hard to find her! Even with her crying and wanting to be found! Darkness is a great blanket for people to hide from each other under, but for God – darkness doesn't hide anything. V11&12 – *“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.”*

The darkness is as light to God. Nothing can hide you from God. No distance, direction, depth or darkness can hide you from God's presence. Hebrews 4:13 says it like this: *“...No creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.”* Nothing can hide you from God. Nothing at all.

So again, the same question arises – is this a good or bad thing? Is God's inescapability a good thing? Or does it unnerve you? Is this a source of comfort to you, or a source of dread to you? It all depends on the current status of your relationship with the God who knows everything you do and is with you everywhere.

But thirdly, David goes on to tell us

3 – God knows us inside out v13-18

David now tells us how God can have such a deep knowledge of us: v13 *“**For** you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb.”* This is so clear, isn't it? You exist not simply as a biological accident, some random chance of nature, regardless of any decisions your parents may have made. David declares that you are the direct creation of wonderful craftsmanship that began long before your birth. He KNIT you together. Knitting is hard – my Mum is an excellent knitter and I'm sure many of you are. I tried to learn it with my class a few years ago. And I learned that - you can't knit by accident – I really tried. Randomly hitting the sticks with wool on together doesn't work. It has to be deliberate and skilled. God knitted you together in your mother's womb - showing his care and attention to detail when he wove you specifically and uniquely. No matter how flawed you may feel this morning.

Yes, sin has marred creation. We are not as perfect as we should be and we have many, many flaws. But to overemphasise our flaws and failings more than we emphasise the wonderful creation that God has made is not to respond how David does – V14 *“I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well”*. He praises God. He looks at himself and the handiwork that God has made – and he praises God, whether or not he is someone who would appear on the cover of GQ magazine. He praises God because he's fearfully made – meaning a cause for great astonishment. Wonderfully made – meaning a creation that only God could himself could make. The human body is a wonderful and fascinating creation. For example, I learned recently that humans are the only creatures that get goosebumps for anything other than fear. We are the only creature to do a great many things – no matter what hinderances we may feel we have – and we are each, individually, uniquely made by God. v15 *“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.”* He knew of you before your own mother did. V16 – *“Your eyes saw my unformed body”*. He knew you before anyone else did. And more than that – v16 *“All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.”* Now I know that the subject of the extent of the sovereignty of God in the world causes some disagreements among Christians today - but David has no problem accepting it or declaring it. *“All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.”*

The verses in this Psalm can give great comfort to those here who are struggling and hurting and in pain this morning. This world is rife with pain. For example, this Psalm is ALWAYS paired with pictures of newborn babies. And yet infertility and miscarriages are so common in churches, and yet so hidden and secretive, that just reading this Psalm can cause so much pain to people struggling in that area. However, for those people - and all of us - this Psalm reminds us that there is not a child that is lost that God does not know or care about. There is not a womb that God doesn't have an inner knowledge of. For all of us, there is not an illness or diagnosis that takes God by surprise. And there is not a day you experience - however painful - that God doesn't care or know about or has gone before you into. He is there. Those days - however unexpected to you - were not unexpected to him. Yes - we'd rather not go through those times. But he has designed those days for you for a reason. Oh, we may not know how those days can lead us to any good thing, but we trust in a God who promises they will. Trust him. Keep trusting him. There is nothing haphazard about the events of your life. *"All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be."*

And David doesn't try and understand God's plans and purposes does he? V17 & 18 *"How precious to me are your thoughts, God! How vast is the sum of them! Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand."* He can't get his head around God's plans. And he sees and understands that these truths are not there to be understood, not fully, but are there to be trusted and - if necessary - clung to by his fingertips. And he also sees that God is with his people from womb to tomb. Infact, he goes even beyond our earthly days. He says *"when I awake, I am still with you."* Here, awake is meant as a contrast to death - David's talking about resurrection. David has faith that, after his death, he will rise again with God, and on that great resurrection day, he is convinced that he will still be in God's presence - from womb to tomb and beyond! And this amazes him.

So yet again, the question remains - is this a good thing? Is it a source of comfort or dread that this God designed you intricately and planned every single one of your days? Is this good or bad news? Is it good news that after death you will come face to face with the God who designed you and knows you intimately? The truth is, it all depends on the current status of your relationship with the God who knows everything you do, is with you everywhere and who knows you inside out.

But the Psalm doesn't end there - so what's the right response to all of this?

We don't have time to go into it in much detail, but he has 2 reactions. His first reaction is fierce loyalty. *"¹⁹If only you, God, would slay the wicked! Away from me, you who are bloodthirsty! ²⁰They speak of you with evil intent; your adversaries misuse your name. ²¹Do I not hate those who hate you, LORD, and abhor those who are in rebellion against you? ²²I have nothing but hatred for them; I count them my enemies."*

That isn't very modern, very PC is it? We're told so often - hate the sin and love the sinner. And yes, that is definitely how we should, on the whole, react. But that's not how David reacts here.

And that's because David isn't just talking about those people who, ignorant of God, live in a way that he wouldn't approve of. Just look closer at the adjectives he uses to describe them in v19-22?

Wicked, bloodthirsty, those with evil intent, deliberately misusing Gods name, God haters, rebels against God.

They are people openly in defiance against God - bloodthirsty, blasphemous, God haters. These are self-confessed enemies of God. Enemies of the God David has just described and shown his adoration for. David's loyalty to God shows itself by his hatred of anyone and anything that openly stands in enmity and opposition to the God he adores. His hatred isn't driven by his own self-righteousness, he doesn't want retaliation for someone who's wounded him, no - he is driven by a zeal for God's name and God's glory and honour and fame. We, rightly, and lovingly, need this same Zeal today. It's complicated and difficult, but we need it.

But then David's second reaction is Humble Surrender. This response in v23-24 are a humble request to God. *"²³ Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. ²⁴ See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."* David asks God to search him again. Know him again. He wants God to scan him for anything that offends him. But if God already knows him, as he said in v1, why does he need to do it again? Because David loves God so much, there is something he hates even more than the sin of the world around him – his own sin. He wants God to search him and show him these failings so he can cut them out. Why? Because he believes that this God wants to, and will, lead him in the way everlasting – the way of eternal life.

The truth is – we won't grow in holiness until we see our sin as a personal offense against God. Sin isn't breaking a rule – it personally grieves God. When we sin, we look at God's face and say "I won't obey you. I don't want to be like you. I want my own way." And we need to desire to root that out, don't we? I feel that so keenly. I don't hate my own sin enough. I long to hate it more.

But – as I close – maybe these thoughts and ideas scare you a little. Maybe you agree with everything I've said about God's intimate knowledge of all you are and do and say and think, and all of your days. And maybe that terrifies you. Because you know that if God was to search you, you would be found lacking. You would be found wanting. And that you could only be considered as one of those from v19-22 – the enemies of God. And that terrifies you.

Well let me point you to the one who came who ultimately fulfils this Psalm. Jesus Christ. He knows we are, in our natural state, enemies of God. We are those described in v19-22. That is all of us – whether we admit it or not. And God would be completely right to slay us – do away with us. But God loves us far more than he hates our sin – and he decided to slay Jesus in our place. Jesus gave his life for us so that we wouldn't have to suffer this anger from God. He took it all. He was fully God, and therefore he saw everything about you. He knows everything there is to know about you. He is the one who is never not with us – he says himself "I am with you always." He made you – John tell us that nothing that has been made was made without him.

But he was also fully human. A man. And as a man, when the father searched him completely, he saw only OUR grievous ways and offending behaviours and thoughts and words. In our natural state, we are all those in v19-22, but Jesus Christ took all of that away from us when he won for us the life everlasting promised in v24.

If you want to know the comfort that this Psalm offers, then you need to turn to this Jesus. Now. Tonight. Turn away from relying on your own good-living, righteousness the Bible calls it, to make you Ok with God. This God knows you too well for that to be possible. But Christ WAS perfect. And he took the punishment you deserve. And he offers you complete, forever, forgiveness from God if you just run away from trusting in yourself, and throw yourself at his mercy and trust in his life, death and resurrection as meeting all the demands that God has on you. And ask for forgiveness because of that. Then the fear of being so intimately known will go away – because it is a the intimate knowledge of a God we can call our loving, good father.

And for those of us who know Jesus already – we can trust this God. We can trust this God completely. Whatever terror, known or unknown, faces us in 2019. He's got it all covered, and we can trust him fully. And with his help we can begin to root-out sin in our lives, and trust him to lead us the way of eternal life. If he was willing to send his son into the world, helpless, rejected and hated by many around him, then punished in our place to save us – then we can trust him with whatever lies ahead. Because nothing surprises him.

You are known. Not just as a collection of facts. No - God knows you completely, wherever you are, whatever you do, he knows you inside out. How does that make you feel? Does it comfort you? Does it terrify you? The truth is, it all depends on the state of your current relationship with this God.