

The God Who Knows Us
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*You have searched me, LORD,
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, LORD, know it completely.
You hem me in behind and before,
and you lay 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.
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 not 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.
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—
when I awake, I am still with you.*

*If only you, God, would slay the wicked!
Away from me, you who are bloodthirsty!
They speak of you with evil intent;
your adversaries misuse your name.
Do I not hate those who hate you, LORD,
and abhor those who are in rebellion against you?
I have nothing but hatred for them;
I count them my enemies.
Search me, 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. - Psalm 139, NIV*

Psalm 139 may be familiar to many of us in the church. It is a rather long Psalm which has an almost epic feel to it. Now I grew up loving those classic, epic songs that were always a little bit longer than the normal three-minute, top forty hits. When it comes to epic songs, I am thinking of songs like “Stairway to Heaven”, “Free Bird”, and “Bohemian Rhapsody.” Now if you don’t know any of those songs, just think of a piece of music with lots of different sections or movements. Often these epic songs start out quietly with guitar or piano and a single voice. Then they build over time as new sections are introduced. Soon they build to a crescendo, usually concluded by an extended guitar solo. But then they often come back full circle to the quieter section that began the whole thing. So, think of today’s Psalm as an epic song with many parts. It, too, will start off with some calmer themes, but it will eventually rage with the equivalent of the searing guitar solo -- only to come full circle in tone and feel to a quieter, more introspective conclusion.

The Psalm begins in the first six verses with these words, “You have searched me, LORD, and you know me.” (Psalm 139:1, NIV) *You know me.* If there is any way to sum up this first section, it is this: *God knows us.* Seven times the root word for “know”, “knowing”, or “knowledge” appears in this Psalm. The Psalmist is amazed that God knows him. God knows all about him – even the words of his mouth before he speaks them! Just think about it – God knows *you*. The God who made all of creation, the God who “spins the whirling planets” (as one of our hymns reminds us), the God who put every star in place, and the God who made every one of the billions of people on this planet – *that* God knows you! The psalmist sums it up this way: “Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain.” (Psalm 139:6, NIV) On one level it is amazing that God knows us and knows all about us. However, on another level, it may cause us some concern.

Songwriter Pat Terry gave a concert here a while back. Pat has written or co-written a number of songs with other artists. He tells of the time of going to hear a young, up-and-coming country singer from Georgia named Travis Tritt, perform in town. Pat said he managed to get backstage after the show to meet Travis because that is what songwriters often do. Upon meeting Tritt, Pat introduced himself and told him he was a songwriter and how much he liked Tritt’s music. Pat said Travis Tritt looked at him, paused for a moment, pointed a finger at him and said, “I know who you are!” Pat said that at first, he wasn’t exactly sure if that was a good thing or not. Then Travis Tritt told Pat that he had seen The Pat Terry Group play a concert at his church a number

of years ago. They talked some more and decided to get together and try to write a song. Later Tritt came over to Pat's house and together they wrote a song that became Travis Tritt's first number one hit called "Help Me Hold On." But, when he said to Pat, "I *know* who you are!" Pat wasn't exactly sure how he felt about that.

I wonder if the Psalmist felt the same way when he realized God knew him . . . and everything about him. Just look at what happens in the next section beginning with verse seven, when he says, "Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?" (Psalm 139:7, NIV) Now, why would he want to "flee" from God's presence? Why would he want to run from this God who knows him and everything about him? Maybe that is something we might all feel from time to time. On the one hand, it is good that the God of all creation knows us. But, on the other hand, God knows everything about me – not only the good stuff, but the not-so-good stuff, too! I have to admit, I am not so sure I like that.

Maybe it is the same kind of response when we start a relationship with someone, and we are not sure how much of ourselves we want the other person to know. On the first date we do what most people do – we only show our best selves. That first date is hardly the time to start out telling someone our deepest, darkest secrets. That approach/avoidance dance is something many of us know. It may also be part of the dance we do when we find out that God knows us. But the amazing thing is that God knows all about us *and yet God loves us anyway!* Paul's letter to the Romans reminds us that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:38-39) – not even those parts of us we really wish God did not know.

So, if our tendency is to run away or "flee" from God, we are reminded in these words that God is always there. God is with us. That is what "Emmanuel" means – God-with-us. It is one of the names the Bible uses for Jesus. And God will pursue us out of love in order to be with us. We see this in the classic poem by Francis Thompson called "The Hound of Heaven" when it says this: "I fled Him, down the nights and down the days; I fled Him, down the arches of the years."

So, God pursues us -- *not* in order to punish us -- but out of love. In verse ten of Psalm 139 it says wherever God finds us, "even there your hand will guide me." So, where does God guide us? I believe God guides us home – like the story of the prodigal son who found himself far from home, living in a way that was going nowhere. We are always the one God is seeking to bring back home to God where we will find welcome, meaning, and purpose in life.

And because God is with us, even when we face the darkest times of life, God promises to be there. The Psalmist talks about being in darkness but holding on to the promise that even when we cannot see God – *God can still see us!* It is like God has super spiritual night-vision goggles. God can see us perfectly, even though we may be going through times that feel like we can't see anything – maybe even God. Maybe you have gone through times where you felt like it was a dark time because of an illness, a crisis, or God felt distant from you. I will tell you that just because you are a Christian and a follower of Christ, those times don't go away. In fact, some of the most spiritual Christians have written about what it is like to go through what they call "the dark night of the soul." But always remember God's promise that even when we can't see God, God knows and sees us, and God is with us.

In the next section of the Psalm, the Psalmist then takes this imagery of darkness and uses it to describe another thought – *God made us*. The psalmist uses beautiful images to talk about how each one of us was created – “knit together” – inside the safe darkness of our mother’s body. God is described here as the great weaver who creates us in that secret place. So not only does God know us and not only is God with us -- *God made each one of us*.

As Christians we believe that two things are true of all people. First of all, that *each one of us is created in the image of God*. There is something of the mark of the Creator on each one of us. When my kids were young and headed out to school each day, I would trace a cross onto each one of their foreheads and say to them, “Remember, you are a child of God.” I heard someone else do that (Roy Oswald), so I borrowed the idea for my own kids. I wanted them to start each day with the reminder that they were made in the image of God, that God knew them, and that God was with them no matter what they faced or no matter what anyone might say about them. Friends, we are all created in the image of God. If we will remember that – then it can change how we treat ourselves and how we treat each other. Next time you have a conflict with someone, remember that not only are you made in the image of God, that other person is also made in the image of God – though it may be hard to detect at the time.

But the second thing we believe as Christians is that *we are also sinners saved by God’s grace*. This is the acknowledgement that we don’t have it all together. We all chose to “flee” God from time to time and need to be guided home to God. And God is the one who makes this return home possible through God’s grace. We can’t do it on our own. God reaches out to us to bring us back home. God does not do this to punish us, but to save us from a life apart from God – a life that eventually can end up in spiritual death and separation from God. God loves us too much not to try to keep that from happening. Yet, because we sometimes try to “flee” God and do it our way – there is sin and brokenness in our world. And that sin and brokenness is what the psalmist encounters in the next section.

If the previous movements of this song remind us that God knows us, God is with us, and God made us – then this next section looks at the sin and brokenness in the world and asks, “So what?” In other words, “So, how do we then deal with the sin, brokenness, and even the wickedness in our world?”

Beginning in verse nineteen, the psalmist almost appears to go a little crazy and lose his mind: “If only you, God, would slay the wicked! Away from me you who are bloodthirsty! They speak of you with evil intent; your adversaries misuse your name. Do I not hate those who hate you, LORD, and abhor those who are in rebellion against you?” (Psalm 139:19-21, NIV) (This is similar to the part of the epic song where the searing guitar solo takes place.) It seems so unlike all that has gone before. One Biblical commentator I read this week simply suggested skipping over the whole thing! That would seem to make sense because this doesn’t sound right . . . or does it?

Face it, there is wickedness and evil in our world – we have seen in recent days. Every day people do awful things to each other. And when we see injustice and abuse, it should make us angry – at least to the point of sensing that something is not right, and someone should stop it. If we don’t find ourselves angry about things being done especially to the powerless, poor, and

vulnerable, then we need to wake up! So, the psalmist seems to be saying that there is sinfulness, brokenness, and even wickedness in our world – and most of us would agree.

But the Psalmist also seems to add this -- that *our “enemies” should only be God’s enemies*. In other words, we need to be upset only by those things that genuinely upset God. Former Columbia Seminary President Steve Hayner used to always begin his classes by praying to God that the things that break God's heart would also break our hearts. So, our enemies should not be those who are simply different from us. Our enemies should only be those whom God would call enemies. God’s enemies are primarily those who are opposed to God’s way, which can be summed up in The Golden Rule – Love God and Love your neighbor as you love yourself. Only those who are opposed to such things would ever be considered as God’s enemies.

And dealing with those enemies is often up to God. For example, vengeance is never our option as Christians. God is the only one who knows enough to dish that out. However, we are to work for a just and fair world that promotes all of us living with one another in peace, and which constrains those who do not. But we need to exercise that constraint as a last resort, not the first.

Yet, when it comes to dealing with enemies, there’s more to how we are to deal with them than what is found in these verses. To put it another way, these verses from Psalm 139 are not the complete or final word on how we are to treat enemies. As Christians, we look backward to the Psalms and all of the Old Testament through the lens of the cross and the life of Jesus. These words from the Psalms are important, but they are not the final word about dealing with our enemies. The final word is Jesus! In his gospel, John calls Jesus, “The Word made flesh.” (John 1:14) If we want to know how to deal with enemies, then we look to what Jesus says and does. What does Jesus say we are to do with our enemies? We are to love our enemies. We are to pray for those who persecute us. We are to turn the other cheek. We are to go the extra mile. (Luke 6:27-36) That is how God deals with God’s enemies. Now that does not mean we let those who refuse to change their ways run rampant. We are to constrain evil -- especially when it hurts the innocent and powerless. But again, that is our last option, not our first.

If we were looking at this as an epic song, we might think it all ends here -- with the searing guitar solo expressing all of the anger of the Psalmist for how to deal with the wickedness of the world – but it doesn’t end there. Like many of the epic songs, it goes back to the tone set in the beginning and gets quieter, as if to make an important point. Notice how this final section ends: “Search me, 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.” (Psalm 139:23-24, NIV) Notice the psalmist does not end up by telling God to wipe out the wicked enemies. No, the psalmist turns away from what is going on “out there” and chooses to focus on what is going on “in here” – within his own life. He is doing what Jesus will talk about later in the New Testament when he tells us that before we try to take the speck out of someone else’s eye and point out where they are wrong, we need to remove what he calls “the log” from our own eye first. (Luke 7:1-5) Only then can we see through the darkness by the light of God and discern what may really be going on. We begin with ourselves first.

This is asking God to show us the sin in our lives that we need to stop. That sin limits us from fully becoming the persons God created us to be. That time of introspection, under the guidance

of God's light, can lead to a time of confession. That is something we do every Sunday at the beginning of our worship services. We do that each week to remember the things that "darken" our lives and our eyes, so that we can see and hear better God's good news. And always remember – God knows us, God is with us, and God made us.

Dr. King, whose birthday we remember tomorrow, knew what it meant to try to love and be reconciled with one's enemies. In a sermon, he said:

To our most bitter opponents we say: "We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We shall meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will and we shall continue to love you. . . . Throw us in jail, and we shall love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our communities at the midnight hour and beat us and leave us half dead, and we shall love you. But be ye assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. One day we shall win freedom, not only for ourselves. We shall appeal to your heart and conscience that we shall win you in the process, and our victory will be a double victory."

When I last visited Israel, we went to the town of Bethlehem where Jesus was born. Today, Bethlehem is divided by a large concrete wall that treats everyone as enemies of each other. On the wall that divides Bethlehem in big block letters are two words that stand out among all the graffiti. The two words? "LOVE WINS." In the end, it always does. LOVE WINS. That is God's promise and that is God's plan. Our choice today is whether we want to be a part of God's plan by how we love one another. Choose love -- because in the end, God's love wins!

In the strong name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.