

Fearfully and Wonderfully Made
Familiar with All My Ways
Psalm 139:1-6; 19-24

Intro: Bad things happen to good people. That is a fact of life. Every week I talk to persons who are suffering and wondering why.

When bad things happen to you, it may prompt you to question your faith and to question God. If it does, you are in good company. This is just what Job did. He was a good man—the best on the planet. He suffered tremendous loss. He lost his livelihood. He lost his home. He lost his children. He lost his health. He lost it all.

Job had all kinds of questions for God. “Why did I not perish at birth, and die as I came from the womb? Why were there knees to receive me and breasts that I might be nursed?” (Job 3:11-12). In the midst of his trouble, Job wonders why a kind and compassionate God would even let him be born alive and be sustained afterward.

You have felt this dilemma at times. You have wondered about the bad things that happen—Hurricane Katrina, oil spills, the devastation of Haiti, and your own personal sorrows. And sometimes you have said to God, “I am doing the best I can, the best I know to do. Take a look inside of me, God. Tell me what I am doing wrong. I will make the change. Only take away this pain.”

Even people who lived 3,000 years ago, were astonished and amazed by their own development, their knowledge and skills, the design of their bodies and of the world. They stood in awe at the birth of a child, just as we do today, amazed that the baby could live in water at one moment and in air the next.

I think Psalm 139 is understood best as a form of complaint. It is a beautiful complaint that speaks amazing truths. And it comes out of the pain and confusion expressed in the last few verses (19-24). The psalmist describes both the wisdom and power of God and his own response to it, and then ends with the question: “So what is going on here? Why are my enemies still alive and powerful? What is wrong with me? Let me know, and I will do everything I can to get right and straight.”

This beautiful psalm is a testimony to the power of pain as well as the power of God. It bears witness to unsolved and unresolved questions. And it demonstrates that difficult times produce some of the most beautiful, good, and true thoughts and expressions.

I. The first of those thoughts is this: God Knows Everything: *Oh, Lord, you have searched me and you know me* (v1).

A. This person in pain is talking to God. This is a good thing. He is not only talking, he is writing down his thoughts. This is good too.

B. He expresses the truth of God’s omniscience. God knows everything perfectly. He is setting God up for his complaint. He is not going to tell God anything that God does not already know. But the things he will tell God are the things that confuse him, confound him, and unsettle him.

C. The omniscience of God is applied personally. For this man who is suffering it is his own personal condition and situation that prompts the question and the contemplation.

1. “You have searched me and you know me.” The word “searched” means “to examine thoroughly.”

***As we waited for our bags at the baggage claim on our international flight, a customs official came out with a drug-smelling dog that put his paws on the side of the big belt and sniffed every suitcase passing by. He discovered one that smelled of drugs, identified it with a bark.

2. God’s knowledge is described in two incredible ways.

a. First, God can “perceive my thoughts from afar.” God knows human thoughts. How that can be is beyond me, but he does. He sees and knows the interior of your mind. He knows the thoughts you never express, the ones that never come to the light of day.

b. Second, God knows the words you will say before you say them: “Before a word is on my tongue, you know it completely, O Lord” (v4). He knows the words and their meaning completely.

D. The difficulties of life reveal more of the nature of God to us. His wisdom is one of those things that we learn. But we also learn...

II. The second thought: God Knows Me: *You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways* (v3).

A. God is intimately acquainted with ALL my ways. God knows you like the back of his hand, like his own backyard.

1. Think of the people whose “ways” you know. You do not know the “ways” of a person until you have been with them for awhile. Because knowing their ways means knowing not only what they do but how they do it, not only where they go but how they get there, not only who they know but how they know them, not only what they say but how they say it.

2. God knows ALL your ways. He knows your way when you are at church—the way you are. He knows how you act when you are at school, at the beach, at the rodeo, at the job. He knows the way you are with people, and the way you are by yourself.

B. This truth applies to you: your person, your activities, your thoughts, your words, your history, and your future. We can illustrate this from the contacts that Jesus had with people. These personal encounters are wonderful ways of seeing and knowing God, understanding who he is and who we are.

1. Our sitting and rising: Nathaniel: John 1:47-51—Jesus identified Nathaniel as “a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false.” He said, “I saw you while you were still under the fig tree.” Nathaniel was amazed by Jesus’ knowledge of him. He responded: “Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel.”
2. Our ways: Nicodemus: “You must be born again” (John 3:7). Jesus knew that Nicodemus was living in a frustrating way, that his religious activities were bringing him no peace. His ways were hidden even from himself, but not from God. This is why Jesus talked to him about a new birth—a completely new approach to God.
3. Our thoughts: Zacchaeus: “I must stay at your house today” (Luke 19:5). Jesus knew that Zacchaeus was ready for a new direction in his life, a different approach to living. He knew his thoughts, that he was tired of his wicked life and ready to repent.
4. Our words: Woman at well: “You are right when you say you have no husband” (John 4:17). Jesus knew the woman fully. He knew what she was revealing and what she was hiding.

C. TRANSPARENCY is ESSENTIAL. You must try to be as transparent as you can be with God. You have nothing left to protect, no dignity or honor. You are an open book. You must get to the place where you want God to see it all. You want him to search you completely. Perhaps you feel, like Job, that if God searches you completely he will be on your side. He will know that you do not deserve this turmoil, confusion, suffering and pain.

D. We should be relieved to have God know our motives and our inmost thoughts, how tired we are, and how much we need rest.

III. The third thought: **God Hems Me In:** *You hem me in—behind and before; you have laid your hand upon me* (v5).

A. Being hemmed in has two meanings:

1. Protection: Job enjoyed God’s protection, Satan observed: “You have put a hedge around him and his household” (Job 1:10). This means a “hedge of thorns” to keep out the predators. God was protecting Job like a shepherd protects his sheep from the wolves.
2. Capture: “You hem me in” is a different word usually translated “besiege” or “bind up” or “assault.” It is almost always the negative idea of capture and containment rather than protection and security.

B. You are surrounded by the presence and knowledge of God. It is before you and behind you. Intellectually God is ahead of you and behind you. You discover nothing that he does not already know. Spiritually you are hemmed in by God. He knew you before you were born. He chose you when you were not yet choosing. He goes before you in all your ways. Physically you are hemmed in by God. You go nowhere where without his presence around you, before you, and behind you.

C. The Hedge gives you comfort when you are afraid. “I will never leave you nor forsake you” is a great promise given to Joshua as he prepared to take on the greatest challenge of his life. He was facing the enemy, and the presence of God was powerful for him. This is just as it was with Job.

D. The Hedge troubles you when you are in pain. When powerful people are around you, they should protect you from harm. Yet you have experienced terrible tragedy, and God was there all the time. Why didn’t he stop the trouble?

So Job will soon ask the question, “Why is life given to a man whose way is hidden, whom God has hedged in?” (Job 3:23). Here a different word is used. It means “to fence, to shut in.” Job feels that God has captured and confined him. He is confined by his limited knowledge and understanding. He feels that he can no longer endure the attention of God.

E. The Hedge is God’s answer to our Questions.

1. Our hope is in Christ. He is the one to whom we turn.
2. We must learn that suffering is part of the journey. This was true even for the Son of God who loved us and gave himself for us.

Conclusion: The woman who came with such pain in her life and prayed to receive Christ, to embrace the Comforter even with her questions.