

Lord, You Know Me

Psalm 139

John Breon

A family had gone to the movie. The youngest child went to the concession stand and when she came back into the dark theater, she wasn't sure where her family was. She walked up the aisle asking, "Does anyone here know me?"

Garrison Keillor told about how when he was a boy he was close to his Aunt Lois who was his youngest aunt and more like an older sister. He liked her because she liked to pretend. They were riding the bus to Minneapolis and played his favorite game: Strangers. They pretended not to know each other. He would walk to the back of the bus then turn around and come back to the seat and say, "Do you mind if I sit here?" And she said, "No, I don't mind," and he'd sit.

As they talked, he made up a story about who he was and why he was in Minnesota. Somehow, he hurt her feelings. She looked away from him and looked out the window for a long time. He was feeling anxious. "Talk to me, please."

She said, "Sir, if you bother me anymore I'll have the driver throw you off this bus."

"Say that you know me. Please."

And when he couldn't bear it one more second, she touched him and he was himself again (*Leaving Home* 235-37).

We want to be known. We need someone to know who we really are and to help us be ourselves. God not only knows us as we are, but knows who we're meant to be and will help us become the people he intends us to be. The words "know" and "known" appear in this psalm seven times. Four of them are in verses 1-6. "Know" is in verses 1 and 23, so that theme surrounds the entire psalm. The psalm writer wants to be known and is known fully by God.

What does it mean for us to be known by God? How does it affect us? How does it call us to respond?

We can't escape God's knowing. God knows who we are and where we are. It can be comforting to realize that God knows us through and through. It can also be intimidating to realize that God knows everything about us.

God searches us. Have you ever been searched—maybe going through security at an airport? It's invasive. Being searched and known can be uncomfortable. There are some things we might like to keep hidden. But God knows it all. Like a mother who knows what her kids are up to, God knows us—what we do, what we think, where we go, what we say.

Do you remember this little Sunday School song?

Oh, be careful little eyes what you see
Oh, be careful little eyes what you see
For the Father up above is looking down in love
So be careful little eyes what you see.

It goes on for several verses, warning little ears to be careful what you hear, little feet to be careful where you go, little hands to be careful what you do. And all because "the Father up above is looking down in love."

The book of Hebrews says that the word of God gets deep into us and judges the thoughts and attitudes of our heart. Then it says, "Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account" (4:13).

We may start to despair that we are truly sunk if God knows so much about us and our thoughts and behavior. If God knows all the wrong in us, what hope do we have? But then we remember God's mercy and grace. God's knowledge of us does call us to be accountable, but it doesn't condemn us when we trust God's grace.

I like the response to God's knowing us that's comes in a prayer called "the Collect for Purity":

Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hidden. Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you and

worthily magnify your holy name. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.
(*The United Methodist Hymnal* 6)

That's a good prayer to pray regularly. It acknowledges who God is—the God who knows our hearts, desires, and secrets. Then it asks God for something—that the Holy Spirit would breathe in us, blow through us and cleanse our heart, give us purity of heart. Then it expresses our purpose—that we could perfectly love God, that is, love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. And, that we could worship God truly. (For a good devotional based on this prayer, see <https://blog.umcdiscipleship.org/the-collect-for-purity-as-a-pattern-for-prayer/>.)

The psalmist recognized that to be fully known is to be completely vulnerable. And that can be scary. But the psalmist also hears and celebrates good news in the marvelous and mysterious reality that our lives are accessible to God in every way at every moment (J. Clinton McCann, "The Book of Psalms," *The New Interpreter's Bible*).

Not only does the Lord know who we are, but he also knows where we are. We can't escape God's presence. There's no place you can go that God won't be there (verses 7-12). "Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?"

If we go as high as we can imagine or as low as possible, God is there. The word translated "the depths" here is *sheol*, the place of the dead. When you've gone as low as you can go, God is there. If we go as far away as we can imagine, even there God's hand holds us and leads us. If we think we can hide from God in the darkness, God's light searches and shines. The darkness is not dark to him and night's as bright as day.

That reminds me of something Jesus said:

This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God. (John 3:19-21)

How we feel about always being in God's presence says something about our relationship with God. Do you embrace or avoid being with God? Would you rather run to or run from God's presence?

The next section of the psalm (verses 13-18) encourages us to run to God because God is the good creator who made us. God knows us so well because God is the source of our life. The psalm writer sings, "I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well." Whatever the ancient Jews thought about human conception, gestation, and birth, they believed God was at work in forming each of us. And, the word for "form" here is also used in other places to talk about how God formed the whole people of Israel. Our modern scientific understanding and 3-D sonograms can help us marvel at the wonder of God's creation.

Verse 16 sounds like God has already predetermined the details of our lives. But that idea runs counter to what the Scriptures tell us about God giving us choice and responsibility. God does have a plan and a purpose for us, but God invites us to interact with him in realizing that purpose. He doesn't coerce us into believing him or doing his will.

The psalmist seems most interested in celebrating how God thinks about us. It's like God won't stop thinking about us. And his thoughts are good, precious to us. As we saw in Psalm 121, God doesn't slumber or sleep. We do, but when we awake, we're still with God and God's still with us.

God's intimate care for us in creation and in all of life is reason to be thankful. It's also very affirming of us and it calls us to live into who God makes us to be, who God knows we can be.

N. T. Wright is a professor and retired bishop in Great Britain. In his book on the psalms, he says that Psalm 139 came home to him when he went through a time of deep depression. All kinds of anxieties and fears had built up and he had tried to hold them back by staying busy and working hard. But they suddenly burst upon him and he felt like he was sinking.

A wise counselor helped him work through old memories and sorrows and also pointed him to Psalm 139. This psalm gives deep comfort

as it affirms that God was involved from the very beginning of our mysterious conception and God knows completely all that makes us who we are.

Even with all our knowledge of how human personalities are formed from the first moments in the womb, we still find that human character has rich variety. It's like a deep well we can't get to the bottom of. The greatest saints and theologians are struck with wonder at God who knows us through and through at every level. "All our hidden motives and fears are like an open book before him; he knows where they came from, and he understands what they are doing to us and what we are doing with them."

Wright reviews some of the other insights of the psalm that we've already mentioned. Then he concludes:

Coming face-to-face with all this did not at once lift my depression. But it was one of the building blocks that my counselor helped me to put in place, one of the foundations of the staircase that led out of the pit and up into the light. (*The Case for the Psalms* 179-82)

The God who knows us, knows who we are and all about us, the God who knows where we are, whose presence is inescapable, is the God who made us and thinks about us always, who is there whenever we wake up.

Isn't that great? So affirming, so good. We'd think the psalm could stop there. But it goes on and it takes a drastic turn.

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. (19-22)

Wow! Where'd that come from? While it sounds like just a call for revenge, there's more going on here. These lines describe how things always are. People who belong to God and who try to live God's way are opposed by those who oppose God. What these verses say is broader and

deeper than asking for personal revenge. They're asking God to set things right in the world. It's like when we pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done." There are several places in the psalms that ask for vengeance. But they seem to entrust the matter to God and leave it with God instead of taking it into human hands. The hatred expressed here is not just personal feeling, but it's a way of saying, "I'm on the LORD's side. I oppose those who oppose God" (McCann). It's also another example that we can talk to God about anything, whatever we're going through, and however we're feeling.

Then, after that angry outburst, the psalmist returns to the desire to be known by God. "Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive [or wicked] way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." Maybe after praying that angry, vengeful part of the prayer, the psalmist feels the need to back up and ask God to examine and evaluate those feelings.

We can pray: God, you know me. Keep searching my heart and my thoughts. Reveal any ways I'm going against you and lead me in your way.

We're never done being known by God. We never reach the end of God's knowledge. It's thorough and deep and ongoing. We keep opening to and surrendering to this God who made us and loves us. God's searching is meant to bring forgiveness and healing and restoration.

And, we're invited to know this God who knows us. It's been said that we give all we know of ourselves to all we know of God. We keep discovering more of ourselves to give and we keep discovering more about God to give to. Then someday we'll be caught up in God's knowing and our knowing will make a huge leap. The apostle Paul says it this way: "For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known" (1 Corinthians 13:12).

Will you come to know the God who knows you so well? Will you grow in the knowledge of the Lord? Will you live in hope of knowing fully as you are fully known?