

The Knowledge of God
 A Sermon on Psalm 139
 Pastor Knox @ Faith Pres Tacoma
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This summer I'll have a few opportunities to fill the pulpit as Pastor Nicoletti travels. On those Sundays I'm planning to preach on selected Psalms. I hope you'll find that choice not only to be a practical one, since Psalms are relatively self-contained, and thus easier to jump into and out of than say a narrative or an epistle, but also an enriching one as we glimpse into the minds, hearts, prayers, and music of our spiritual ancestors.

Speaking of the spiritual riches of the Psalms, theologian Johann Gerhard wrote, "The Psalter is a theatre where God allows us to behold both Himself and His works; a most pleasant green field, a vast garden, where we see all manner of flowers; a paradise, having the most delicious flowers and fruits; a great sea in which are hid costly pearls; a heavenly school, where we have God for our teacher; a compend[ium]* of all Scripture; a mirror of divine grace, reflecting the lovely face of our heavenly Father; and the anatomy of our souls."¹

But, even as the Psalter is one of the most familiar and beloved books of the Bible, it also contains some of the most challenging and off-putting parts of the Bible. For example, "Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!" (Psalm 137:9) "The righteous will rejoice when he sees the vengeance; he will bathe his feet in the blood of the wicked." (Psalm 58:10) Even a Christian as revered as C.S. Lewis called the sentiments expressed in passages like these "devilish" and "diabolical." He explains, "The hatred is there - festering, gloating, undisguised - and also we should be wicked if we in any way condoned or approved it, or (worse still) used it to justify similar passions in ourselves."²

Part of what makes Psalm 139 so fascinating is that it embodies both of these qualities. On the one hand, it's the kind of psalm that many of you probably memorized in childhood. Commentators frequently describe it as "bright," "intimate,"³ "noble,"⁴ and "sublime."⁵ One called it "the summit of Old Testament poetry"⁶ and another "the most glorious and excellent Psalm in all the book."⁷

On the other hand, its penultimate stanza presents many readers with a stumbling block. It seems to be a mood change so abrupt that we might compare it to changing the TV channel from Bob Ross painting happy little trees to the second scene of *Saving Private Ryan* (when German machine guns are ripping American soldiers apart on Omaha beach on D-Day, June 6, 1944).

¹ Plumer, Pg 7-8. * the original quotation uses the antiquated form of the word compendium ("compend") so I updated it

² CS Lewis, quoted as his writing appears in pages 9-10 of *War Psalms of the Prince of Peace* by James Adams.

³ From various commentators as collected in Spurgeon's *Treasury of David* (abridged version ed David O Fuller pg 634)

⁴ *The Expositor's Bible* pg 324

⁵ At least half of the commentaries I read used this adjective to describe Psalm 139

⁶ Derek Kidner pg 500.

⁷ Aben Ezra, From Spurgeon's *Treasury of David* pg 634

In the Sunday mornings when I'm filling in for Pastor Nicoletti, we'll consider both the glory and the guts of the Psalter.

Let's begin with Psalm 139.

This is the word of the Lord...

Please keep the text in front of you and may the Lord help us to understand, believe, and obey His word.

Psalm 139 boils down to three words: God knows you. Here in Psalm 139 that means three main things.

First, it means that God knows everything about you. Notice the way David opens and closes the psalm with same root words, “searched/search,” “known/know,” “ways/way” and “me” (verses 1-3 and verses 23-24). Notice the repetition of “know/knowledge” in verses 1, 2, 4, 6, 14, and 23. In both of these ways, David highlights the central theme.⁸

The Hebrew concept of “knowing” is often much richer and fuller than what we have in mind when we use the English word “know.” For example, you and I might say that we “know our neighbors” if we have shaken hands, exchanged names, and had a few casual conversations. But when the Hebrew Bible says, “Adam knew Eve,” it means that they were sexually intimate.

You can see that expansive sense of knowledge on display throughout this psalm, but notice it with me here in the first stanza (verses 1-6). Consider the imaginative synonyms David uses for known: “searched,” (verse 1) a word which one commentator points out, “is used for such human activities as spies searching out the land, miners searching for precious ore, or scribes searching the law,”⁹ “discern,” (verse 2) a word which implies not just acquaintance with information but evaluation, “searched out” (verse 3), which is, by the way, a different Hebrew word than the “searched” of verses 1 and 23, and one that literally means “winnow” or “sift” (as in separating the wheat from the chaff) and is used in Proverbs 20:8 to describe an act of judgment: “A king who sits on the throne of judgment winnows all evil with his eyes.”

But it’s not just these suggestive verbs that illustrate God’s comprehensive knowledge, it’s the objects of those verbs. Look again at these verses and consider what God knows about David. Notice the pairs of opposites here, “sit down and rise up” (verse 2), “my path and my lying down” (verse 3), “behind and before” (verse 5). Like the expression “from A to Z,” these are poetic ways of saying that God knows everything about you. He knows your routines and your habits. He knows where you are and what you are doing. He knows what happened at the beginning of your day, what will happen at the end of the day, and everything in between.

But the Lord not only knows our outer self (our bodies, words, and actions), he knows our hearts as well. That’s already implicit in some of the verbs we considered a moment ago (for example, “searched” and “winnowed”), but look again at verse 4, and notice the implication that God knows us even better than we know ourselves. I would guess that we have all experienced from time to time that words which we didn’t intend to say slip out of our mouths, whether because of passionate emotion or simply because of a physical mistake of articulation. Here David reminds us that, even before those mistaken or unintentional words leave our mouths, the Lord already knows what they will be.

Let your mind run with the thought that the Lord knows everything about you. He knows the number of hairs on your head, the number of freckles on your skin, the number of cells in your body, and the number of days you will live. He knows exactly how many words you spoke yesterday, and He can perfectly sort out which

⁸ Thanks to Jack Collins and Leslie Allen for these insights.

⁹ Ross pg 819

ones were true and which were false, which were generous and edifying and which were destructive and selfish. He knows what you did last night and what you are planning to do this afternoon. He knows the thoughts that are going through your mind right now and the hopes and dreams you have for the future. He knows the secrets you have kept hidden from your friends, parents, or your spouse.

God knows you, and that means He knows everything about you.

But, secondly, it also means that He is present everywhere you go. Look again at the second stanza (verses 7-12) and notice that this is not an unrelated thought. In fact, if you'll look again at verses 5 and 6, you can see that David already starts transitioning towards this idea in the first stanza when he speaks of being "hemmed in" by God, a word most frequently used in the Hebrew Scriptures to describe the way a besieging army surrounds an enemy city to prevent escape. One commentator described the imagery of verse 5 this way, "[it's a] picture of cupping something with the hand, like a bug on the table."¹⁰ In a similar way, the last half of verse 6 emphasizes God's inescapable knowledge. One commentator described it as a "military expression...The verb 'it is high' describes something that is unattainably high, like the wall of a fortress. And 'prevail over'...has the sense of conquering or controlling. God's knowledge is like a high fortress before which he [the psalmist] stands powerless."¹¹

Here in Psalm 139 David is contemplating the connections between God's knowledge and God's presence. It's not that he is just going through a list of divine attributes, as in "stanza 1, omniscience, stanza 2, omnipresence, stanza 3, omnipotence, stanza 4, holiness," etc. Instead he is reflecting on how these attributes illuminate and reinforce each other. Part of the reason that God knows you completely is because He is already present everywhere you go.

Look at this second stanza and notice, once again, the juxtaposition of opposites, which is a poetic way of describing every place: The "wings of the morning" likely refers to the beams of light shining from the East at dawn. The "uttermost parts of the sea" would have referred to the West in the Hebrew imagination, since the Mediterranean Sea was to the west of Israel. One commentator explained it this way, "The psalmist here is raising the hypothetical idea that he might mount up in flight at dawn and streak across the sky with the speed of light from east to west. Even if he could do that, he could not escape the presence of God."¹²

"Ascend to heaven" and "make my bed in Sheol" (i.e. the grave) not only refers to the highest and lowest places in the world, but also to life and death. Speaking of this verse one commentator wrote, "The gospel has given the second line of the present verse a whole new flavor, first in that Christ descended into Sheol on our behalf and could not be held by it (Acts 2:24, 31) and secondly, that for us, Sheol has become Paradise."¹³

Consider the final set of opposites here, darkness and light, and notice the progression that's been happening throughout the first three stanzas from familiar to foreign places. David began Psalm 139 by reflecting on his everyday life at home; here in the second stanza his mind roams to heaven, the grave, the ends of the ocean, and to the darkness of the unknown. And in the third stanza he reflects on his mother's womb

¹⁰ Ross pg 822

¹¹ Ross 823

¹² Ross pg 824

¹³ Kidner 501

and the origins of his life, something which would have been almost a complete mystery to someone of that time.

But the darkness of verses 11-12 not only represents the unknown but also what is painful and perplexing. The Hebrew word translated as “cover” in verse 11 is only used in two other places in the Hebrew Bible (one of which is the first promise of grace in Genesis 3:15) and in both cases is it translated as “bruise,” “crush” or “trample.”¹⁴ In other words, the Psalmist here is not imagining himself running and hiding from God, but instead is imagining himself in the kind of extreme adversity and confusion that caused the author of Psalm 88 to cry out, “you have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me; darkness has become my only companion.”

Psalm 139 is an answer to dark Psalms like 88 because it affirms that the Lord is with His people in the dark.¹⁵ Christian, think about what that means for you. He is with you in the darkness of injustice. He is with you in the darkness of loneliness. He is with you in the darkness of depression, despair, and discouragement. He is with you in the darkness of confusion, uncertainty, and disappointment.

He doesn’t just know about those dark places. He comes to you in those dark places and puts His hand upon you, like a father calming, comforting, and guiding an upset child.

Christian, when you are tempted to doubt that the Lord is with you in the dark, remember that the Lord Jesus experienced the darkness of the cross. He was bruised by the darkness (*Gen 3:15*). As the hymn puts it, “there in the ground, his body lay, light of the world by darkness slain. Then bursting forth in glorious day, up from the grave he rose again.”

The Lord knows everything about you. He is present everywhere you go. And, thirdly, He has orchestrated every detail of your life.

Look again at stanzas 1-3 (verses 1-6, 7-12, 13-16) and notice the progression from familiar to foreign, from outward to inward, and from the present to the beginning of life. The psalm has moved from life in the present to mother’s womb, from the familiar paths and habits of home to darkness, from the observable habits of sitting down and rising up in verse 2 to the “inward parts” of verse 13, which is a reference to the kidneys, organs which are deeply hidden from view and yet central to life. In the Hebrew imagination, the kidneys were associated with the conscience, which points us back to the idea that God knows and evaluates us down the level of our inmost thoughts.

Consider the connection David draws between the womb in verse 13 and the depths of the earth in verse 15. To a person of David’s day, long before ultrasounds and C-sections, the beginnings of life would have been as mysterious as the Mariana Trench is to us, and yet, David affirms that even in that unknown place, the Lord was present with him, weaving his body together like a beautiful tapestry.¹⁶

¹⁴ Allen Ross (pg 813) and the Expositor’s Bible (pg 325) are both examples of commentators who argue that it should be translated “bruise” not “cover.”

¹⁵ Kudos to Greg Strawbridge for helping me make this connection. In his sermon on Psalm 139, he calls 139 an answer to 137, but I think that 88 is a better fit.

¹⁶ Ross 827

But it's not just that the Lord made David; He also chose David. Look again at verse 14. If you have an ESV Study Bible, notice that the editors footnote the first part of this verse, giving an alternative translation, "for I am fearfully set apart." The Hebrew word often refers to the Lord making a distinction between His people and those who do not know him, as in Psalm 4:3, "The Lord has set apart the godly for himself."

But it's not just that the Lord made and chose David; He also providentially planned David's days. Look again at verse 16, and ponder the image of the Lord as an author who had already written the story of David's days before they happened.¹⁷

Once again, notice that Psalm 139 is not just a list of divine attributes, but an exploration of God's comprehensive knowledge. Notice the connecting word ("for") that begins this stanza in verse 13. Notice the repetition of "knows" in verse 14. Think about the imagery of God's book in verse 16; books contain knowledge.

What David is saying here in Psalm 139 is that the reason that God knows you comprehensively is not just because, "well, He is God, and God, by definition, knows everything." Of course that's true, but for the Christian it is so much more than that. Christian, He knows you because He has chosen you. He knows you because He made you. He knows you because He has written the story of your life. He knows you because He is with you wherever you go. He knows you because He is leading you by the hand through the darkest moments of your life. He knows you because in Christ He can sympathize with your weaknesses and sorrows. He knows you because His Spirit dwells within you, searching your heart, discerning your intentions, and sifting your desires. He knows you, because in your baptism, He named you. He knows you, because here in the Lord's Supper each week He dines with you. He knows you because He is your God, and you are His people.

What difference should this great truth make in our lives? David concludes Psalm 139 with three main applications.

First, it should delight us. Look again at verses 17 and 18 and notice the sense of awesome wonder. It's as if David is swimming in an ocean of God-consciousness. Everywhere he turns, he sees evidence of the Lord's care for him. Every detail of his history, every bone in his body, every place He has been, every word He has spoken...it all leads back to the Lord's inescapable knowledge, presence, and providence. David realizes that he could no more get away from God than Hamlet could get away from Shakespeare.

Speaking of God's "thoughts" (verse 17), one commentator wrote, "such knowledge is not only wonderful (compare with verse 6) but precious, since it carries its own proof of infinite commitment: God will not leave the work of His own hands (cf 138:8) either to chance or to ultimate extinction."¹⁸ Christian, God has thought about your life 100x more than you have, so be comforted, be encouraged, and be confident in His love.

God knows you, so rejoice.

¹⁷ One of Calvinism's arguments for predestination is that the only way God can truly know the future is if He has determined it. If you believe that God has left the human will completely free of His influence, it becomes very hard to explain how He could possibly know what will happen in the future. Notice how well the logic of Psalm 139 supports the Calvinistic understanding of Divine foreknowledge. The Lord knows the number of David's days in advance because he authored each one of them.

¹⁸ Kidner pg 503

Secondly, this truth should sanctify us. Look again at verses 19-22 and consider with me how they fit into the overall flow of Psalm 139. As we've seen, throughout the psalm David has been surveying all of life, and everywhere He turns He sees the Lord's knowledge, presence, and providence. In verses 17-18 he has been pondering the fact that behind every facet of his life are God's thoughts (i.e. His good purposes and plans).

But then David hits upon something that seems not to fit this bright and beautiful design: Sin. The conscious rejection of God's good purposes and commands. People living as if this all-perceiving, all-pursuing, all-planning God doesn't exist or doesn't matter.¹⁹ People who have no gratitude to the God who made them, no loyalty to the God who sustains them, no appreciation for the God who knows everything about them, no reverence for the God who searches and evaluates them, no concern for the God who is already present everywhere they go, and who have no trust in the God who sovereignly rules over them.

In fact, it's worse than that because these people consciously, proactively dishonor the God to whom they owe everything. Look again at verses 19 and 20 and notice that their specific sins are destroying God's image and desecrating God's name. To be a "man of blood" (verse 19) is to be a murderer, and to be a murderer is to be a destroyer of God's image, since man was made in the image of God. Look again at verse 20. One commentator suggested that the first half would be better translated "they speak of you with malicious intent," because it explains the second half of the verse. He puts it this way: "[they] mention Yahweh for a false or deceptive purpose."²⁰

Obviously, David here does not give us enough context to know what specific situations he had in mind, but it's not too hard to think of relevant Biblical examples: Jezebel having Naboth put to death on the false charge of blaspheming the Lord's name so that Ahab could get his vineyard. The Pharisees crucifying Jesus in the name of honoring the Lord. Saul killing Christians in the name of zeal for God. Ananias and Sapphira claiming that they were giving all of the proceeds from their land sale to the church, when in fact they were keeping much of it back for themselves. The young Amalekite in 2 Samuel 1 who is suspiciously eager to tell David that he killed Saul on the battlefield, secretly hoping David would reward him for finishing off his rival.

Thinking about scenarios like these helps us understand how and why David could justly use such strong language here in verses 19-22. As the king of Israel, David was called to reflect Yahweh's holy character to the people and to enforce justice in the kingdom.²¹ It would have been a constant temptation for David to accept a bribe, to ignore the pleas of the downtrodden, to look the other way when friends or powerful people committed injustice, to grow weary in defending the honor of God's name, or to misuse his authority to commit injustice himself (which, of course, he did in the case of Uriah and his wife).

Praying for God to slay the wicked was one of the ways David fulfilled his royal calling to terrorize evildoers and defend the righteous (Rom 13:4). After all, remember that the law of God calls both murder and blasphemy capital offenses. How could it be wrong for David to pray that God would enforce the very punishment that His own law calls for?

¹⁹ Thanks to Allen Ross for the alliterative inspiration. In his commentary, he speaks of the "Perceiving, Pursing, Planning" God.

²⁰ Ross 831

²¹ Compare with Romans 13:1-17

Praying for God to slay the wicked was also a way for David to be faithful in the role in which Adam failed: to be a royal-priest who guards holy space from the defilement of serpents.²² The land of Israel, like Eden, was holy, and David, like Adam, was called to guard it from defiling serpents, which the wicked are according to Psalm 58:4. And in this, David anticipates the Lord Jesus who will one day make the entire world a holy dwelling place of God, purging it of all evil and unholiness.

By expressing hatred for the wicked, David is identifying with the Lord, who is righteous and holy. By expressing hatred for the wicked, David is also embodying the principle of Proverbs 8:13, that the fear of the Lord is hatred of evil. Furthermore, by hating the wicked, David is faithfully imitating the Lord, who, according to Psalm 11:5, “hates the wicked.” Or to put it another way, David here is eschewing the unholy so he can “be holy as I the Lord your God am holy.” (Lev 19:2).

But, Pastor Knox, doesn't David's hatred contradict the Bible's pervasive command to love your neighbor and Jesus' command to love your enemies? No, it doesn't. Here are a few reasons why.

First, as one commentator put it, “the hatred in this passage is not spite, but zeal for God.”²³ Look again at verses 20-21 and notice that these are first God's enemies, and secondly, as a matter of loyalty, David's enemies. Notice that there is no grudge and no personal vengeance, only indignation that the wicked are desecrating God's name and image.

Secondly, it simply won't work to argue that Jesus has changed the ethics of hatred so that David's sentiments here are no longer acceptable or holy. The idea here is, “well, maybe God tolerated this kind of thing under the Old Covenant, but now Jesus has raised the bar so that hatred of any person, in any sense, in any circumstance is always sinful.” It's a common argument, but it contains an obvious and fatal flaw. Luke 14:26 is crystal clear that Jesus does not reverse the demand for holy hatred; on the contrary, he expands it. “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.”

Thirdly, thoughtful reflection demonstrates that it is not only possible, but surprisingly common, to simultaneously, but in different senses, love and hate the same person. Listen to how one theologian put it, “there is a kind of hate that is only possible for those who love, a hate that is angrily opposed to a person precisely because the person is acting in ways that inflict self-harm and thus fail to lay hold of that God-determined good that is desired for the person by the lover. In this sense, there are circumstances in which the one who truly loves must hate. This does not suggest by any means that all forms of hate are ethically consistent with the demands of love, for disordered love will give rise to disordered (and so unethical) hate. One must love rightly in order to hate rightly, but there are times when one must hate truly in order to love fully.”²⁴

The evidence that it is not only possible, but common, to simultaneously experience love and holy hatred for the same person is right under your nose, Christian. It's how you feel about yourself. Is it not the universal experience of growing Christians that from time to time you are confronted with things about yourself

²² Thanks to Trevor Laurence for this insight. From *Arise O Lord and Cursing with God* (I forget the page references)

²³ Kidner pg 467

²⁴ Laurence 170-1

that you rightly despise and yet find very hard to change? It's what Paul was expressing in Romans 7:24 "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?"

Fourthly, David's hatred here in Psalm 139 does not contradict Jesus' command to love our enemies because in the cross perfect love and perfect hatred intersect.²⁵ As he hung on the cross, Jesus was simultaneously the most beloved and the most despised creature of all time. In so far as Jesus bore our sins, in so far as God made him to be sin who knew no sin, God hated him and poured out the full measure of His wrath. But in so far as Jesus was the innocent Son of God who was obedient even to the point of death, the Father was never prouder.

With all due respect, C.S. Lewis was dead wrong about whether Christians can pray like David did here in Psalm 139. When we pray for God to slay the wicked, He can answer that request in one of two ways: either He can unite that person to Christ, baptizing him into the death and resurrection of our Lord, or He can bring that person down to the grave and hell.

As those who have been crucified with Christ, it's right for us to plead with God to answer in the first way rather than the second. But we also must not apologize for or be embarrassed by the holiness of our Lord. Ultimately, our sympathies must be with Him, not with the wicked.

God knows you, so be holy.

Finally, God knows you, so be humble. It's fitting that David's follows his prayer for the death of the wicked with a prayer for God to expose his own sins. It's appropriate that David follows his expression of hatred for the wicked with an expression of humility and self-examination. David is acknowledging that, but for the grace of God, there go I. He is acknowledging that the Lord knows him better than he knows himself, and that there may be sinful ways within himself that he has not even realized. He is confessing that his own sanctification, ultimately, depends upon the grace of this all-knowing God.

This is where the knowledge of God will always lead a faithful Christian. A mature Christian will be righteous in his living but without a whiff of self-righteousness. He will be holy in his conduct but also the first to confess his ongoing need for God's help in overcoming the flesh that remains within. He will be confident in God's care yet ready to confess His unworthiness of such favor. He will hate the wicked, and yet He will also gladly tell them of the forgiveness that can be found in Christ. He will be joyfully confident of God's electing love, yet always fearful of grieving His indwelling Spirit. He will take full responsibility for his own flaws and failures, and yet when he thinks about the places he has been and the good things He has accomplished in this life, He will happily confess that behind it all has been the all-knowing, all-pursuing, all-planning God.²⁶

May the Lord make each one of us that kind of Christian. Amen!

²⁵ Thanks to Aaron Ventura for inspiration along these lines. In a sermon on this passage he said, memorably, "The cross gives us a way to both love and hate our enemies."

²⁶ Although I don't recall Pastor Rayburn addressing Psalm 139 in his book, *The Truth in Both Extremes*, I found his concept of the Christian as one who embodies paradox to be quite helpful here as I thought about the closing stanzas of Psalm 139.

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