

1. The God We Cannot Escape: He knows everything about us

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Preacher: Bob Fyall

[0 : 00] It's a psalm to the choir master and a psalm of David. And David writes, O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up.

You discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O Lord, you know it altogether. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me. It is high. I cannot attain it.

Where shall I go from your spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there. If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me and your right hand shall hold me. If I say, surely the darkness shall cover me and the light about me be night, even the darkness is not dark to you.

[1 : 10] The night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you. For you formed my inward parts. You knitted me together in my mother's womb.

I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works. My soul knows it very well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

Your eyes saw my unformed substance. If in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there were none of them.

How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! If I could count them, they are more than the sand. I awake and I am still with you.

O that you would slay the wicked, O God! O men of blood, depart from me. They speak against you with malicious intent. Your enemies take your name in vain.

[2 : 16] Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you? I hate them with complete hatred. I count them my enemies. Search me, O God, and know my heart.

Try me, and know my thoughts. And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting. May God bless that wonderful and glorious psalm to our hearts and to our minds.

And our subject for this month is The God We Cannot Escape. And for today particularly, He knows everything about us. Verses 1 to 6.

Some of you may have read a recent bestseller by Bill Bryson called A Short History of Nearly Everything. A very entertaining, provocative, annoying, and amusing little book.

If you have read it, you'll also enjoy his recent work on Shakespeare, or you ought to. Now, this Psalm 139 is not a short history of nearly everything.

[3 : 25] It's much more a short history of absolutely everything. Absolutely everything. Absolutely everything that has ever happened, ever will happen, absolutely everywhere in this vast universe is known and completely open to God.

Psalm is full of huge thoughts of God. You must have noticed that as we read it. And yet, it's intensely personal. We don't know when David wrote this. There's no indication of when in his life he wrote it.

Nevertheless, it's obviously a psalm of considerable experience and considerable reflection. And some of you may know the poem The Hound of Heaven by Francis Thompson.

I fled him down the days and down the nights. I fled him down the arches of the years. Which draws its inspiration from this psalm, particularly from verses 7 and following.

But our emphasis today is on the fact that God knows everything about me. I don't know about you. I find that rather terrifying. And it is.

[4 : 30] God knows everything about me. Now, all our emphasis today is on self-awareness, isn't it? We are encouraged to be self-aware. Now, we all know, of course, how distressing, how embarrassing it can be when someone is totally self-unaware and when their own self-image is so utterly different from how other people find them.

Now, to a certain extent, since we're all fallen people, we are a bit like that. But there are some people where the contrast between their self-image and the actual way they appear to other people is so appalling that it's at best embarrassing and at worst simply tragic.

But here, the psalmist is saying, if we want to know ourselves, we've got to know God because only by knowing God can we truly know ourselves.

We are made in his image. He made us for himself. In other words, David is saying not what Burns said, see ourselves as others see us, but see ourselves as God sees us.

That's what this psalm is about. Oh Lord, you have known me. That doesn't just mean God knows about me, the way that we know about people whom we've never met.

[5 : 46] God knows me in a personal, intimate way. This is a word that's used about God's covenant. When God makes a covenant with people, he knows them.

He has a relationship with them. So what does God know? And the short answer, of course, is everything. And in a sense, of course, that's easy to escape.

Oh well, if God knows everything, there's so many things he can just forget about it. But what the psalmist does, what David does, is he identifies two particular areas of our life, which include the others.

I want to look at these with you for a few moments. God knows everything about me. And the first thing that God knows is God knows all about my everyday living.

Verse 2, you know when I sit down and when I rise up. Now that's a phrase that often occurs in the Old Testament. It was a Hebrew way of talking basically about the whole day.

[6 : 42] From getting up to bedtime through the night to the next morning. It would make an awful difference to getting up, wouldn't it? When we awaken in the morning and the day floods into us, what do we feel?

We want to turn over and go to sleep often, don't we? This psalmist says, when I awake, God is already there welcoming us. God is saying good morning, essentially, before we are still bleeding eyes, while we are still wondering whether to have another five minutes.

God is saying good morning. And at night, it's easy to get afraid in the dark, isn't it? I mean, that's a natural consequence of being human.

Fears and phantoms of the night. In the dark, certain, when you hear a knock, particularly if you're alone in the house and you hear a noise, you wonder and you feel afraid.

This psalmist, as he says, later, even the darkness is not dark to you. The night is as bright as the day. And in so many of the psalms, this is mentioned. Psalm 91, for example, we will not be afraid of the terror that stalks by night.

[7 : 55] Knowing it's a very human fear. In the dark, we're not in control. And of course, the other aspect of darkness in scripture is, the gospels tell us that men love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil.

And very often, evil deeds are performed under the cover of darkness. So, what does God know about me? He knows about my getting up. He knows about my going to bed.

He's with me during the night and all the things in between. The active things when I rise up and the passive when I sit down. This has been called sometimes the practice of the presence of God.

The sense that God is with us every moment. My grandparents' generation, including my grandparents themselves, often had in their kitchens a plaque on which were the words, Christ is the head of this house.

The unseen guest at every meal. The unseen listener to every conversation. Now, you don't need to have a plaque up on your wall. Fashions differ. That generation often did that kind of thing.

[9 : 05] But the point is, if we realize that God is with us, it would both be a tremendous encouragement and also, as I say, a tremendous challenge and rather frightening.

But this isn't static knowledge. Verse 3, you search out my path. This doesn't mean, as it were, that God says good morning and then good night and forgets about us in between. This word search,

the word is often used about winnowing or sifting wheat.

And the suggestion is that all the decisions I make, everywhere I am, all the things we do, God is totally involved in them. That's the idea here.

And he's shaping us into what he intends us to be. You search out my path. Now, the path, of course, implies the future. Very often, the way and the path in Scripture suggest the whole course of our life.

And surely the psalmist is saying, I may wander from your path, Lord, but you'll never wander from mine. I think that's so important. He has a plan for our lives.

[10:10] You search out my path, my line. You're acquainted with all my ways. Now, ways here is a deeper word than actions and so on and words.

It really suggests disposition, temperament, personality. God has made us. God's given us particular personalities. And we can be sure if God's given us a particular personality, God is going to work with us in that personality.

When you're converted, you are changed. You are changed, of course. But your basic personality remains the same. The personality that God has given you, that is the personality he's going to shape to make you like Christ.

If you're an introvert, you're not suddenly going to become an extrovert and the other way around. He is going to use you as he has made you. He's going to refine that. He's going to shape that.

So, what does God know about us? He knows all about our everyday life. Think about that tonight when you go to bed. Think about that next morning when you wake up.

[11:14] But the second thing that God knows about us is our inner life. And that really comes from verse 4, even before a word is on my tongue. Behold, O Lord, you know it all together.

God, in other words, isn't just observing us. It's possible to observe people. And of course, if you're in certain positions, that's part of your job, to observe people.

If you're in a senior position, part of your job is to observe people, see how they're getting on, help them. But you never really know what's going on inside them. Our God is, in a way, that we cannot understand, knows us better than we know ourselves.

Not just what we do, but the motives behind it. And that's why, of course, God is so kinder than we are often. We see people's actions. What we don't know is the pressures on them.

What we don't know often are their motives. But God does. And this is particularly illustrated here by the word, even before a word is on my tongue.

[12:18] Now, words are so often an index of character, aren't they? Particularly what we say when we're caught off guard. And then we say, oh, I didn't mean that. What we mean, of course, is the opposite.

We did mean it, but we'd rather people hadn't heard us saying it. Now, very often that happens and very often people can be very embarrassed by it. God is never going to be surprised by what we see.

God is never going to be, God is never going to turn away from us because of that, because he knows what we are going to see, even before the thought which translates into the word is formed.

On a human level, you can see this. Sometimes those dear to us, we often know what they're thinking even before they speak, but our knowledge is never perfect and we can make mistakes. But God, knowledge is far deeper. Now, what are we going to make of all this then? Look at verse 5. You hem me in behind and before.

[13:19] Now, if you're at all like me, you don't like being hemmed in. I think I suffer from at least a mild form of claustrophobia and I hate being hemmed in either physically or by being pressurized.

So, one way of looking at this is this is stifling. God is a celestial tyrant. Everything I do is looked at. Everything I do is weighed up.

Everything I do is criticized. And that can be one way to take it. And sadly, of course, that is how many people have taken this. You know from the Gospels that when Jesus was here on earth, this is the way the Pharisees had taken this great truth.

That God knows us, that God is in charge of every action to make a lifestyle of absolutely stifling legalism where everything had a rule, everything had a regulation.

That is surely not what David means. When we think of it truly, this is totally liberating, isn't it? There is absolutely nothing I do or you do that is insignificant.

[14 : 31] You may feel you don't matter all that much. You are not a superstar. Your name is not in the headlines. Your name is not on everybody's lips. Samus is saying, you matter to God.

You matter totally to God. And when he hems us in, that's not that he's stifling us. That means he is totally protecting us.

Behind and before, lay your hand upon me. Now the hand of God in scripture is usually a symbol of the power of God. God, we are told, made the heavens by his hand, by his mighty hand.

He brought the people out of Egypt by his mighty hand and over and over again in the Psalms. The psalmist prays that the hand of the Lord or the arm of the Lord or sometimes even the finger of the Lord will protect his people.

And that's what's being said here. You have been behind and before. That means that no situation is going to arise.

[15 : 37] There is no place you are ever going to be where God is not there before you. You are not going to be able to run ahead of him in that sense. It also means there is nothing in the past where God is not which means there is nothing in the past that cannot be forgiven if we bring it to him.

The only things that God cannot forgive are those which we stubbornly refuse to bring to him. And there are so many people who are trapped in the dungeon of their past.

Trapped and completely crippled by things they've said things they've done things that other people have said and other people have done which every time they think about it completely destroys them.

God is behind us. Take them to God as the old hymn says take it to the Lord in prayer. God is above us. God is beneath us. God is totally protecting us.

Now that does not mean that tragedies don't and won't happen. It doesn't mean that everything will be plain sailing. We know that it would be a terrible it would be a terrible thing to say to say that and to deceive people.

[16 : 55] What it does mean is that even when these things happen God controls them and God will work them together for good. As Paul says in Romans all things work together for good to those who believe God who are called according to his purpose.

And verse 6 surely is so such knowledge is too wonderful for me. It is high. I cannot attain it. This is a reminder that we don't know everything.

Even God reveals to us his character. God reveals to us his love. God reveals to us his care. But there are still going to be puzzles. If you meet somebody who tells you that they've sussed everything they know the answer to everything then I'm always amazed that I do occasionally meet people like that and I always feel tempted to say to them why hasn't the Lord taken you home to heaven?

Because you've learned everything there is to learn. It's a waste of time you're being on earth any longer. The point is on earth there will always be mysteries. But these mysteries must be placed in the context of the God who knows.

So as we finish today almost certainly there are those of us here who are nervous and worried.

Almost certainly there are those of us here who are frightened.

[18 : 13] almost certainly there are those of us here who feel guilty and almost certainly there are those of us who feel tempted. Perhaps even people are wondering whether to commit themselves to this God.

This time has a powerful message for us because this God wherever you are whatever you are doing and whoever you are searches you and knows you protects you behind and before and lays his hand upon you.

And if we are wise then we will give our lives totally into the hand of that God and trust him and believe in him. Let's pray. Lord you have searched and known me you know when I sit down and when I rise up.

God our Father we pray that we may take this great truth into our daily lives that it may color that it may lighten everything we do and everything we are.

We commit each of us to you and pray that during the rest of the day and during the days to come that we will indeed know the protection and guidance and grace and love of the God who knows us and who cares for us.

[19 : 29] We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.