

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
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## **Fully Known**

Psalm 139:1-12

About five years ago, *Esquire* magazine included an article that was highly critical of the unchecked power and influence of four huge technology companies: Amazon, Apple, Facebook, and Google. Describing the supremacy of Google, the author wrote:

As more and more people become alienated from traditional religion, we look to Google as our immediate, all-knowing oracle of answers from trivial to profound. Google is our modern-day god ... Think back on every fear, every hope, every desire you've confessed to Google's search box and then ask yourself: Is there any entity you've trusted more with your secrets? Does anybody know you better than Google?<sup>1</sup>

Though other companies have similar practices, Google has generally stood out for the amount of data it collects, which means that the company knows a lot about you. Your Google search history generates a wealth of information that's useful in building a profile of you. In that profile, Google predicts your age, gender, marital status, income, and personal interests, all of which help the company target their ads to match your demographic features. True, Google has a way for you to go into your account settings to see an overview of their information on you and even download a data packet with everything Google stores on you. You can also adjust your settings to limit the company's tracking activity. But even so, the question raised in the *Esquire* article still lingers: "Does anyone know you better than Google?"

"O Google, I have searched you and you know me," might be a contemporary acknowledgement of technology's omniscience. But centuries before the arrival of the internet, the psalmist was reflecting on the experience of being "known" by a divine source outside ourselves. "O Lord, you have searched me and you know me" (v. 1). That's how today's text opens. The key word in this psalm is "know(n)/knowledge," which occurs seven times in the span of 23 verses. It frames the psalmist's message. It drives his affirmations about the presence of God, the power of God, and the purposes of God.

In fact, the very first word of this psalm is the divine name "Yahweh," rendered in English as "Lord." And then, the very first word of verse two is the emphatic Hebrew pronoun "you." So as commentators have pointed out, this psalm isn't just about divine omniscience. It's most of all about how the divine "you" knows "me." This dynamic of "I" and "you" shapes all 24 verses of the psalm.<sup>2</sup> This means that God, while transcendent, doesn't choose to be remote, and while mysterious, doesn't choose to be a mystery. God wants us to live in close personal relationship with him. God wants us to know him.

But that all begins with God knowing us. "O Lord, you have searched me and you know me." According to the psalmist, God's knowledge is comprehensive. He knows us fully. Our deeds. Our thoughts. Our words, before they are even spoken. Nothing about us is concealed from God's perception. In one respect, this can be troubling and frightening. True, God knows our loving deeds, our holy thoughts, our healing words. But he also knows our hateful deeds, our wicked thoughts, our hurtful words. Our brokenness and sinfulness

are in full view to him. As one prayer used regularly in the Anglican tradition begins, "Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid." So much for privacy when it comes to God. But that's good news in that it can lead to confession and cleansing, to repentance and reform. As we hear in another psalm used by many Christians this past week, on Ash Wednesday: "Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me" (51:10).

So yes, the recognition that God examines our lives can bring us to a disruptive confrontation with our own lostness. But at the same time, it can awaken us to our foundness, in Christ. With God's help, we can see more clearly both our flight from God and his pursuit of us. Francis Thompson captured this in his poem "The Hound of Heaven," in which he images Jesus' love for us as a hound dog: "I fled Him, down the nights and down the days; / I fled Him, down the arches of the years; / I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways / Of my own mind; and in the midst of tears / I hid from Him..." But Thompson knew the unrelenting love of Jesus and experienced it in his own life. In fact, Dorothy Day once said of what Thompson had written, "It is one of those poems that awakens the soul, recalls to it the fact that God is its destiny."

If our lives come from God and are meant to move toward God, we dare not deceive ourselves or imagine that we deceive God, as if we are somehow invulnerable. The psalmist says, "You hem me in—behind and before; you have laid your hand upon me" (v. 5). That's how close God is. That's how much his presence surrounds you. Whether you take that as reassuring or as troubling may very well depend on how you're living your life. Your deeds, your thoughts, your words, none of them hidden from God. When the Lord searches you, what kind of life does he see?

When each of us asks himself or herself that question, we need to do so with the assurance that God is for us and that God is with us, in every way at every moment. And in every location. "Where can I go from your Spirit? says the psalmist. "Where can I flee from your presence?" (v. 7). Again, the psalmist's emphasis is on how God's presence is coming at him all the time, no matter where he goes. If he goes up to heaven, God is there. If he goes down to the depths—the grave, death itself—God is there. If he travels east, God is there. If he travels west, God is there. Google Maps' location tracking pales in comparison to God's knowledge of where we are.

Even the darkness is no barrier to God's presence. "The night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you" (v. 12). This could be good news in the sense that we can't conceal our lives from God. He simply won't leave us alone or not hold us accountable. Or it could be good news in the sense that no matter whatever dark, threatening, and chaotic place we find ourselves in in life, God is there. The darkness is no match for the brilliance of his presence. Either way, it's good news that we can't escape from, hide from, or be separated from the love of this all-knowing God.

Sheila Walsh is an author and Bible teacher who has written very openly and honestly about her experience of God's loving redemption in her life. She describes one decisive moment this way:

In 1992 my life hit the wall. One morning I was sitting on national television with my nice suit and my inflatable hairdo, and that night I was in the locked ward of a psychiatric hospital. It was the kindest thing God could have done to me.

The very first day in the hospital, the psychiatrist asked me, "Who are you?"  
"I'm the co-host of the *700 Club*."

"That's not what I meant," he said.

"Well, I'm a writer. I'm a singer."

"That's not what I meant. Who are you?"

"I don't have a clue," I said, and he replied, "Now that's right, and that's why you're here."

And the greatest thing I discovered there is sometimes some of God's most precious gifts come in packets that make your hand bleed when you open them, but inside is what you've been longing for all your life, to be fully known and fully loved.<sup>3</sup>

Fully known and fully loved by a God who won't stop seeking us and coming to us. That's the starting point and the foundation of coming into and living in a close relationship with the Lord. But that closeness can be both attractive and unsettling. As one person has pointed out, "Carved into our souls, we both long for—and fear—intimacy. Our desire to be known and loved is outdone only by our fear of being known and loved."<sup>4</sup>

"O Lord, you have searched me and you know me." "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain." Or as Eugene Peterson renders it, "This is too much, too wonderful—I can't take it all in!" (*The Message*).

Today, as we've gathered to offer God our praise and to receive his word, we have the opportunity to take some more of it in. Though God knows us fully, we're still growing in knowing him and entrusting our lives to him. So he comes here today, seeking us out and making himself known, so that we'll be where we most need to be, in communion with him, bound to him and belonging to him, in his love. One preacher has compared it to what happens in Margaret Wise Brown's children's book, *The Runaway Bunny*. A baby bunny tells his mother that he is going to run away. But she describes how she will go to extraordinary lengths to find him. If he becomes a fish in a stream, she will become a fisherman and fish for him. If he becomes a rock on a mountain, she will become a mountain climber and climb to where he is. If he becomes a crocus in a hidden garden, she will become a gardener and find him. If he becomes a bird and flies away, she will become a tree in which he can land. A couple of other runaway options follow, but each time she counters with a way to get to him. Finally, he says that he will become a little boy, and she says that she will become the mother that he comes home to. "Shucks," says the baby bunny, "I might just as well stay where I am and be your little bunny." As this particular preacher points out, "There is nowhere to escape God. Except God's own arms of kindness."<sup>5</sup>

Beyond the end of today's text, the psalmist confesses God's presence with him at the beginning of his life, even while he was being formed in his mother's womb (vv. 13-18). So the psalmist's start was seen, and overseen, by God. And his future can be entrusted to God. In the present, what matters most is that the Lord knows him and is with him. Author Skye Jethani once talked about why he didn't use Twitter, now renamed X. He said,

We all want our lives to matter, and we believe they only matter if they are noticed by someone. I wonder if this desire for a witness isn't what fuels a lot of blogs, Facebook, and especially Twitter. We want someone, anyone, to take notice ... to care about us ... to watch us and by their attention communicate, "You matter. Your life counts."

Jesus Christ is God's fullest and most decisive way of showing us that we are known, and that our lives matter. Your life, my life, are seen and searched by a God who appeared in this world in human form in order to redeem us and reconcile us to himself. We have the

death and resurrection of Jesus as proof of God's relentless love and his passionate pursuit of relationship with us.

Go back with me to the beginning of today's sermon. Tech giants may be incredibly skilled at gathering data and building a profile of who you are. To some extent, they know you. But none of them are who the Lord is, and none of them have gone to the lengths that the Lord has gone, most of all in Christ, to seek after us and make us his own. That's why you need to belong to him, and entrust your life and your future to him. "O Lord, you have searched me and you know me." This is good news indeed.

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<sup>1</sup> Scott Galloway, "Silicon Valley's Tax-Avoiding, Job Killing, Soul-Sucking Machine." *Esquire* (March 2018).

<sup>2</sup> J. Clinton McCann, Jr. "The Book of Psalms." *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 4 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996) n.p.

<sup>3</sup> Sheila Walsh, "Staying Alive." *Leadership Journal* (Summer 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Chris Ridgeway, "Fixing Our Privacy Settings." *Christianity Today*. August 20, 2018. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/september/theology-of-privacy-fixing-our-settings.html> (February 15, 2024).

<sup>5</sup> Jason Byassee, Commentary on Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18. *Working Preacher*. January 14, 2024. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/second-sunday-after-epiphany-2/commentary-on-psalm-1391-6-13-18-6> (February 15, 2024).