



KNOWN BY GOD – Psalm 139; 1 Peter 5:7-11

Becky Douglass (05/04/2024)

The other day it struck me that I hadn't looked up into the night sky and saw the stars for a long time. The fact is that I don't go out at night all that often. But even when I do go out, living in the city limits what I can see. There is way too much light around at night and even if we had a power outage and everything went dark, I am surrounded by two-story buildings and the patch of sky that I can see is quite limited.

This realisation made me a bit sad because I can remember a time when my experience was very different. As a young adult, I lived on a farm outside of Dalby, QLD for a while. I was often outside at night walking between buildings, and I remember being almost overwhelmed by the stars there. With no light pollution, and the ability see to the horizon in almost all directions, the night sky was amazing. Standing there looking up at all those brilliant stars brought a deep awareness of how small we are in the vastness of the universe.

If you know when and where to look (mainly in the northern hemisphere, not so much down south here), you can see a something which looks like a little fuzzy tuft of cotton. (You can see it in the upper right-hand corner of picture above.) What you're seeing is not a star, but another whole galaxy of stars. It is at the most distant thing you can see with the naked eye. It is the Andromeda Galaxy.

Say you decided to make a visit to this galaxy, travelling at the speed of light, which is 300,000 kilometres per second. You might want to warm up your engines by flying back and forth across Australia. You could do that 60 times in just one second. Then you'd head out into space and pass the moon by in another 1.3 seconds. After about 8 seconds, you'd pass the sun – hopefully not too closely! You'd pass the nearest star in about 4 ½ years and finally leave the Milky Way in maybe 6 to 8 thousand years – depending on where you left it.

Then you'd travel on between the galaxies in the emptiness of space. The Milky Way would get smaller and smaller, and the Andromeda Galaxy would grow larger and larger. You'd begin to see star clusters and eventually individual stars. Finally, after 2 ½ million years you'd enter the outer reaches of the Andromeda Galaxy, passing the first of its billions and possibly trillions of stars.

The numbers involved are hard to comprehend, especially when you realise that the Milky Way and Andromeda galaxies are just two out of billions of galaxies in the universe. The Bible is the master of understatement in Genesis 1 when it says, "*and he made the stars also*", as if that was a minor afterthought!

No wonder that we feel insignificant as we look up into the night sky and see the stars. How could the God who made all this, know me, want to listen to me pray, care about what happens to me? And then we read Psalm 139. In these verses, we come face to face with the realisation that this awesome God – the one who made all of this and keeps all of this vast universe spinning along in perfect order – this God not only wants to know me, He does know me. Not just as a number in a census or a name in a list, but knows me personally, relationally, and intimately. How can we ever get our heads around that?

I'm not sure we ever can, but David, in this Psalm, sets out to begin to come to grips with God's knowledge of him. One of the first things you notice as you read this Psalm is the constant repetition of the words "you", speaking of God, and "I" or "me", referring to David – and by extension, to us. David is describing a relationship between two people who are closely entwined. This back and forth sets the rhythm of the Psalm, like a circle going round and round, binding the two of them together.

God's Knowledge

The Psalmist gives us three different ways that God comes to know us intimately.

1. God looks closely (v. 1-6)

You have searched me, Lord, and you know me. (v.1)

Right away, in the very first verse, we see the intimacy of David's relationship with God. God hasn't just glanced in his direction as His eyes swept over the people of the earth, God has searched him and as a result knows him deeply. The word used for "know" implies a deep understanding and care for someone and is even used for sexual relations in the Bible. God not only knows what David is going to say and do but also why he is doing those things. To be honest I'm not sure I always know why I do things! But God knows me better than I know myself.

David goes on to say, "*You hem me in behind and before*" (v. 5) This could be a negative prospect – indicating that God stops him from moving freely. But if the nearness of God is a positive, then this is a wonderful picture, like a mother who wraps her children up tight to keep them safe and warm.

I am struck by the images of God's hands in this Psalm. For instance, here he says, "*You lay your hand upon me*" (v. 5) We know that God doesn't literally have a hand, but it

conveys God's personal involvement in our lives. Here, it is an intimate touch. It reminds me of Jesus touching the leper instead of just healing him by speaking a word. How welcome is the touch of someone who loves us!

God knows us because He has looked closely at us.

2. God is always there (v. 7-12)

Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? (v. 7)

Even if David wanted to, he couldn't get away from God. Again, this could be a negative image, but I don't think David sees it that way. As someone who often had to flee his enemies, David knew what it meant to be all alone and on the run. However, from the highest of heights to the depths of the deep, from the east to the west, he knew that God would be with him to guide him and to hold him secure. Once again, we have a picture of God's hand – this time holding us in the face of trial. When we can't hold on to God, He still holds on to us and nothing can tear us from His grasp.

The final two verses in this section have sometimes been interpreted to indicate that David hoped the darkness would hide him from God, but that God could still find him in the darkness. However, I am not convinced that David wants to hide from God. This Psalm presents God's presence as more positive than negative. Another interpretation that seems better to me based on a different understanding of the word the NIV translates as "hide" – "*Surely the darkness will hide me*". The two other places this word is used in the Bible it is translated as "bruise" or "crush". This is why the NASB translates this phrase as "*Surely the darkness will overwhelm me.*" If this is the better translation, then David is saying that his life has become so difficult that it feels like darkness is overwhelming him and all light and hope are gone. But God knows the darkness he is facing, and even in the depths of despair, God is there, bringing the hope and light of His presence.

God knows us because He is always with us.

3. God purposefully creates (v. 13-16)

For you created my innermost being ... all the days ordained for me ...

David is assured that his life is not the result of some random chance combination of DNA and events. He has been purposefully made and his life is guided by God's ordaining power. Therefore, he is not a mistake! He is "*fearfully and wonderfully made*" according to God's plans. Once again, we see God personal, "hands-on" involvement as we are "*knit together*" by God and God's plans for us are "*written in (his) book*".

I don't understand all about God's sovereign control of our lives – how to balance God's ordaining and our own free will and responsibility for our choices. Every time I think I've got it figured out I discover another perspective which upsets my system! But I think what David is seeking to convey here and the important thing for us to take away from this Psalm, is the security we have because the God who loves us and cares for our lives is in control and nothing can take us out of His hands. What a wonderful assurance this is in the face of the uncertainties of life.

God knows us because He made us and fashioned a plan for our lives.

Our response

How can we respond to a God like this? A God who knows us so intimately and still chooses to love and care for us so completely?

1. Awe and wonder (v. 17-18)

*How precious to me are your thoughts, God! How vast is the sum of them!
Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand—
when I awake, I am still with you.*

God thinks about us a lot! He knows us better than we know ourselves. We can't know one person this well. Even couples who have been married for many years don't know each other like this. All we can do is sit in awe and wonder of our great God and His personal, "hands on" commitment to us and involvement in our lives.

2. Righteous Indignation (v. 19-22)

*If only you, God, would slay the wicked!
Away from me, you who are bloodthirsty!
Do I not hate those who hate you, Lord,
and abhor those who are in rebellion against you? (v. 19,21)*

After the positive affirmations of the previous verses, these negative declarations come as a bit of a shock! It probably doesn't surprise you that the lectionary readings and many sermons stop at the end of verse 18. Some commentators go so far as believe that these verses are a later addition to the Psalm and dismiss them. And yet, I have to believe that we have the Bible that God wants us to have and therefore I have to look harder at them and seek to understand how they make sense in the context of the whole Psalm.

As I was thinking about this, I remembered an incident from Primary school. Yes, I can still remember some things that happened that long ago! I think I was in Year 6 at the time. I had gotten caught up in a particularly unhealthy dynamic among the girls in the school I was attending in Newcastle. There were two or three "top girls" who ruled the playground. Surrounding them were a group of about a dozen or so who were in the "in group" – and then there was everyone else! Membership of the "in group" was a tenuous thing. You could be kicked out for any minor reason and then you had to wait to be invited back in again when they thought you were worthy once again to be included. Some girls actively campaigned to be let back in, others just waited to be asked and some wise ones decided it wasn't worth it anymore and accepted their lesser status. It was horrible!

I got involved in it because one of the "top girls" attended church where my dad was a pastor, and we were friends at church – maybe because my dad's role gave me some status there. But that friendship didn't always extend to the playground. When I was occasionally voted out of the group, she rarely objected or advocated for me to be reinstated. Her friendship didn't go very deep.

I wish I could say that I was one of those who decided to walk away from the group altogether, but I didn't. However, I do remember one time when I rebelled against the system. There was one girl who had been particularly kind to me during a difficult time when the others hadn't been very sympathetic. It had meant a lot to me. A short while later, she was voted out of the group for some minor offence, and I strongly objected – even with my desperate need for acceptance, I knew that it was wrong. In solidarity, I left the group with her, choosing to turn my back on them for their behaviour (for a little while at least). I rejected them because they had rejected someone I valued.

In these verses, I think we see David rejecting those who reject God. He does this because he has come to realise how much God knows and loves him and all that God has done for him. He realises how wrong it is to speak against God and not respect Him. Therefore, he aligns himself with God and counts those who rebel against God as his own enemies. The language may sound harsh, but this is poetry and strong language is not unusual in this type of writing. It also shows us how serious it is to go against the God of the Universe!

3. Trust (v. 23-24)

*Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts.
See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.
(v. 23,24)*

David has now come full circle in his thinking. He started by stating that God had searched him and known him, he explored what this means, and ends by asking God to continue to search him and know him. He wants God to know his heart and to see his anxious thoughts. He trusts God to hold him and care for him. He wants God to make sure there is no rebellion in him and to lead him in the right way to live. He doesn't want anything to hinder his relationship with God.

It is this kind of trust that we see in 1 Peter:

Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you ... And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. (1 Peter 5:10)

Peter acknowledges that we have a real reason to be anxious because we are under attack from those who are against God. However, we can trust that God knows us and what we are facing. Even if the worst happens, we can proclaim with David “*even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.*” (v. 10) Our heavenly Father will never, ever fail to care for His children.

One final thought

So far, we have been looking at our own personal relationship with God. As individuals, we can rest secure in His knowledge of us and care for us. But God has placed us in the community of His people here in this place. Do these truths have any impact on our life together?

A couple of weeks ago I was in YouTube, collecting the links for the “Sunrise Promises” by Professor David Needham that we have been sharing in the Prayer Update this year. As I was watching one of these videos, I noticed another suggested video someone had posted – an excerpt from a talk he had given about 15 years ago. Out of curiosity, I clicked on it and as I listened, I knew I needed to share it as we conclude today. In it, Professor Needham tells a story. I thought about trying to re-tell it for you, but decided he does and much better job than I could! It is just a short recording – I promise you it is worth the time to hear what he has to say!

The link is: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1hCIY0i8o4c&t=59s>

God knows just what we need and cares for us. Often, He gives us the opportunity to be the “hands on” expression of God’s care for each other. And just as He knows us and what we need, He also knows how each of us are made and can best help and He will enable us to do to it well. What an awesome privilege!