

January 14, 2024

“Inescapably Known”

Psalm 139:1-6; 13-18

Intro:

Relationships are all about being known. The deeper the level of knowledge and understanding about the other person, the deeper and more closely connected that relationship usually is. Think about the relationships that you have with other people – we delight when that other person does something, or says something, that shows a depth of understanding about who we are. Often those moments are accompanied by our exclamation of “Oh! You know me so well!”.

On the flip side, a relationship that is falling apart is often realized in remarks such as, “I don’t even know you anymore”.

But we love to be, and long to be, in relationships with people who really do know us. We want them around us. We give them license and leeway in our lives to speak words of great encouragement, and also those hard words of accountability that we need to hear, but that can only be given by someone who is close to us.

There is a sense of safety and completeness in those close relationships.

As we look into Psalm 139 this morning, we find this closeness of relationship, but it is far greater and far deeper than any human-to-human relationship that we experience. The psalmist is speaking of a close relationship so wonderful and profound that it is beyond comprehension, but there is also a tension in some of these lines that almost speaks of a fear of being so completely known. Such a relationship is only possible with Divine involvement, and I am not talking about the Christian perspective that God is present in our own human relationships. I am talking, and the psalmist is talking, about relationship between God and people. Creator and created. The relationship between you and God. It is personal. It is individual. It is Divine presence with us.

The Psalm:

Psalms 139 is ascribed to David and is the second psalm in the final section (book five) in the Psalter. It is a psalm that is meant for music. There is a hymn-like feel to it of praise and adoration. It is a song, a poem, that would have been sung and presented to God as the individual approached the temple in time of worship. It is a song that places God in His rightful place as judge, and if you skip ahead to the last section of the psalm, verses 19-24, you will find yourself drawn into a petition for the judgement of God to be visited upon those people who, in the eyes of the psalmist, are evil and are not giving proper reverence to God. This is a dark turn in the psalm, but it is one that can only be taken in confidence by the psalmist because of the relationship he has with God, which is described in the first 18 verses.

It seems harsh for us to wish God to punish others. It almost begs the question of who do we think we are, to petition God for such things. Who are we to judge who is good or not? What do we really know about them? For that matter, what makes us any better than them, so that they deserve wrath and we do not?

I believe the psalmist understands all of these questions, which is why he prefaces his petition with a detailed understanding of the relationship between himself and God. He can make those claims not because he is so worthy, but because he knows that God knows him inside and out. He knows that God sees his petition not as a petty self-serving thing. He knows that God sees and understands his character and the experiences he has had. He offers himself first for examination and judgement, before he seeks to place others in that position in the final two verses.

Known By God:

This morning I want us to look more closely at the first part of this psalm. There are three sections contained in the first 18 verses. We have already read the first and third sections, with the second starting at verse 7 and going to verse 12. All these sections point to a deep and profound relationship between the psalmist and God. This relationship gives the psalmist confidence even though there is

some uncertainty (does he really want to be so intimately known by the one who will ultimately judge...).

Often when people read or discuss these opening verses of psalm 139, they attempt to make the argument that we have to be on our best behaviour because God is always watching. It's kind of like how little kids get paranoid when we get close to Christmas and the song "Santa Clause is Coming to Town" tells them, "He sees you when you're sleeping. He knows when you're awake. He knows if you've been bad or good, so be good for goodness' sake."

That view sees God as distant and impartial, interacting in our lives only as some sort of behaviour watchdog. There is no relationship. No intimate knowledge and understanding of the whole person that you and I are. Of course, we can't let things swing too far in the other direction and completely ignore that God is a judge and that the psalmist does place himself under God's judgement. We just have to be careful to keep that in balance.

It is in relationship with God where we find the greatest comfort in this psalm. We are known by God because He is present with us. No matter where we go in our life's journey, God journeys with us. He steps where we step, pauses where we pause. He sees into our souls and perceives our struggles about decisions we have to make, and our joys when something wonderful happens in our world. And more than that, He perceives our thoughts, and the thoughts behind those thoughts. He understands our motivations better than we do.

He is, in every sense and understanding of the word, intimately knowledgeable about us. And He chooses to stay close to us. He chooses to be present.

He was present in the moment that we were conceived. He was present in the formation not just of our bodies – thinking in only those terms in verses 13-14 doesn't allow for the completeness of God's understanding of us. If we think only in terms of our physical formation, then these verses are really nothing more than fuel to justify refusal to change and grow in our lives (God made me this way and

so I am going to stay this way). This is not a passage to be used to support an idea that everything in creation is perfect and therefore good. There is lots that is not. There is lots about how we as humans are physically formed that is not perfect. That is part of the consequences of the fall and sin.

When the psalmist speaks of God's hand in our formation, and the days of our lives being recorded in His book, he is speaking of our whole selves, not just our physical bodies. He is speaking of our personalities, character, hopes, dreams, passions, sensitivities. How we will relate to one another, and to Him. The recording of our days is not a rigid career path that we have no choice over, but a laying out before God the infinite possibilities that our choices – good and bad, will lead us to. There is nothing in our lives that we do or experience that is a surprise to Him. And He is present with us in each of those moments and experiences.

That is the joy, and the terror to a degree, that brings tension in the second section of verses 7-12. God's presence is inescapable. No matter where we think we can run to in those moments where we don't want to be exposed to God's view, God will be present. We can not hide from Him. While this knowledge might be unsettling when we think of the areas of our lives that we know are not pleasing to Him, there is also a comfort to be had in it. Those parts of our lives – the secret thoughts, the activities and words and friendships that we would rather exclude God from, those parts are pits of darkness in our lives. When we pursue those paths, we step into darkness. We don't have a clear sense of purpose or direction. It is easy to get lost and mired in those things, and to become the type of person we were never intended to become. But, because God is present with us, He sees into that darkness. He knows the way out. We are not lost to Him, even though we might be lost to ourselves. And if we can remember that he is present with us, because yes, we may have tried but we could not escape Him, His light will come to dispel the darkness and confusion and fear we might be experiencing.

And all of this knowledge, as the psalmist says, is too wonderful for us and too great for us to understand. And the fact that God's thoughts are on us, is something that is and should be precious to us.

Let us rejoice in that happy knowledge. Amen.