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## Searched and Known

Psalm 139

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on July 17, 2011, by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

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“There’s no escaping my love.” I wonder if you’ve ever said those words to anybody. I know someone who routinely signs her email messages to friends and colleagues with those very words. “There’s no escaping my love.” In fact she used to shout those exact same words down the street to her children when she dropped them off at school, accompanied by much gorilla-style long distance arm-encircling. “There’s... no... escaping... my... lo-----ve.”

Think about what it might mean to be a child, hearing those words. Would it not be suffocating and oppressive – not to mention embarrassing and unsettling – to be on the receiving end of more love than you had any idea how to deal with? Or would it rather be glorious and releasing, freeing and empowering, to know that however much you might feel a fool, a failure, a freak or a fraud, this woman with the forgiving eyes and the warm embrace would always adore you? Or could it be somewhere in-between? Today I want to talk about that somewhere in-between. “There’s no escaping my love,” says the beckoning voice with the everlasting arms... and we say, “Errr... can I get back to you on that?”

The One Hundred and Thirty-Ninth Psalm pinpoints us in exactly that somewhere in-between, poised between suffocating enclosure and empowering embrace. Except in this case the subject isn’t a big-hearted mother casting aside her social inhibitions. The subject in question is God.

I wonder if you’ve ever had a dream, maybe a recurring dream, where you’re running away from a mysterious pursuer, and becoming breathless and exhausted as you find fewer and fewer places to hide, until suddenly, at the point when you’re about to be caught, you find yourself awake, sweaty and confused, trying to recall what it was that was chasing you and why you were so desperate to get away. Psalm 139 is as intense and sweaty as that dream. It turns out that what was chasing you – what was searching you out – was God. And why you were so desperate to run away... well, that’s what the psalm leaves you wondering about.

“I know you.” I wonder if anyone has ever said those words to you – maybe in the hurly-burly of a networking social event, maybe in the faraway parking lot of an anonymous vacation beauty spot, maybe in the raised voice of an argument with a longstanding but mistrustful family member, maybe in the intimacy of loving touch. “I know you.” Feel the layer upon layer of meaning and resonance and texture in those brief words. They may be simple recognition, turning a stranger into a previous acquaintance, carrying the pleasure of remembrance or the fear of rejection and forgetfulness. “I know *you*.” They may be words of reproach and bitterness, as someone names a history of deception and broken promises and manipulation and betrayal, in such a way that says, “And I’m never going to make that mistake again.” “I *know* you.” Or they may be words of gentleness and joy, of feeling understood and appreciated and comprehended and loved, for all one’s clumsiness and blunders and follies – words that are spoken with tender eyes, only inches from yours, with a compassionate smile, and with palms enfolded in one another. “I know you.”

That’s what Psalm 139 says to each one of us, in all its multi-textured complexity. “I know you.”

I know you in four dimensions. First, depth. “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 far away.” This is such a domestic picture. God knows me so well that he anticipates when I’m going to sit down, when I’m going to wake up, what I’m thinking about and what I’m going to be thinking about, which route I’m going to take to where I’m headed, what I’m about to say. We all want people to think we’re beautiful, and clever, and fun, and wonderful. But isn’t it even more flattering to be studied so minutely, to be intricately examined and scrutinized as profoundly as this. “You really know me,” we say, and we glow because we are enormously touched – but we also shiver

because we're a little scared at the same time. The psalm says, "You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me." It's affirming and intimidating at the same time. "There's no escaping my love."

Then there's the dimension of height. "Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me." One of our most instinctive reactions when we're scared of what people know about us is simply to run away – to put ourselves physically in a place where we don't have to endure the shame or exposure of being known. There's an urban myth about a person who sent an identical anonymous message one Friday to a random selection of six senators that simply said, "They know everything: flee" – and by the end of the weekend, so the story goes, all six had abruptly left town. The psalm proclaims that we can't hide, and we can't become invisible to God, however far we run. "There's no escaping my love."

The third dimension takes this discovery even further. "If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there." God's presence isn't limited to this life, this earth, this existence. If we die, if we go into perpetual darkness, if we go into dazzling light, if we are buried in the earth – wherever we are or in whatever form we come to be, there God is, beside us, with us, among us, before us. Probably every one of us has, at some time or other, maybe frequently, wondered what it would be like to end our own life, and have held back, maybe from fear, maybe from conscience of hurting those who love us. These words suggest something that seldom occurs to us. Not that our death would change and ruin and destroy everything – but that it wouldn't change anything, at least not in God's sight, because God would still be there, as present as ever, probably more so. "There's no escaping my love."

And there's yet a fourth dimension, not about space but about time. These are perhaps the most precious and mysterious words of all. "For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made." God knew me before there was a "me" to know. God knew the days of my life long ago, as if they were words and sentences in a book. God made me as delicately as a brain surgeon makes stitches. Again, we have this poignant mixture of fear and wonder: I am "fearfully and wonderfully made," because it's astonishing that God cares about these tiny particulars of my existence, but it's also evident that God knows me oceans better than I know myself. Listen again to the fear and wonder in these words: "There's no escaping my love." We were with God, all along. And God will be with us, to the end of all things and beyond.

"I know you." When God says those words to us, they mean all four dimensions – they mean depth, they mean height, they mean beyond this space and beyond this time.

Who knows you? Who really knows who you are? Have you ever let another human being see into your soul? In 1969 singer-songwriter Peter Sarstedt released a song entitled "Where do you go to my lovely?" It's addressed to a young woman named Marie-Claire who lives a jet-setting lifestyle in Paris with diamonds and pearls in her hair and, in her apartment, a painting she stole from Picasso. But the singer can see through these superficialities, and he's skeptical about where her soul truly lies. He sings,

Where do you go to my lovely  
When you're alone in your bed  
Tell me the thoughts that surround you  
I want to look inside your head, yes I do.

You can never quite tell how he really feels about this alluring but infuriating young woman. Eventually, as if he's giving her a last chance, he reminds her of how they grew up together in abject poverty.

I remember the back streets of Naples  
Two children begging in rags  
Both touched with a burning ambition  
To shake off their lowly-born tags, so they try

Finally, he pleads with Marie-Claire to look into his face and remember just who she is. He recognizes that she still bears the scars of her upbringing deep inside, and he's sure that he knows her better than she wants to know herself. But here's the same poignancy: do we really want anyone to know us that well? Do we really trust that if someone truly knew us, they wouldn't expose us and reject us and humiliate us and shame us? That's what makes this song to Marie-Claire so memorable. We never quite know, all the way through, if the words are ones of enduring, longsuffering love (of the "no escaping" variety) or whether they're the embittered venom of a slighted suitor, now resolved to destroy the maiden who'd always evaded his advances. There are a lot of Marie-Claires in the world, who've tried to reinvent themselves and have plenty of good reasons to keep secrets. Maybe you're one of them. It can be very hard to believe that if someone truly knows you, they'll truly understand and love you. Even if you've known them all your life.

The woman I mentioned earlier, who insists there's no escaping her love, doesn't limit herself to cascading words of affection down the street to her children. She makes extraordinary friendships. Some while ago she got to know a man who'd lived a really rough life. He'd been shot in the face, and part of his cheek and ear were disfigured. And he'd spent a long time in prison. My friend first loved, and, through loving, came, over a period of years, to know this man. Some days they ran errands together; other times they just talked. But gradually she began to realize something was wrong. This is how she told me the story: "He kept getting sick, and what was happening never occurred to me until I was sitting in the infectious disease clinic with him, and he was telling me how he felt. And I said, 'Darling ... I think you have HIV. I think that's why you're sick all the time, and why I have to wear the gowns.' And he said, 'No!' And I said, 'Honey, it's me. I know your doctor, and he's an AIDS doctor. I think you should ask.' And he said, 'No...! You won't love me!' And I said, 'Oh, darling, I already do. You can't stop me. *There's no escaping my love.*'"

Most of our attempts to love and know like God aren't quite as successful as that. In one of the strangest passages in the whole Bible, this most exquisite of psalms drastically changes gear near the end to express purple anger on God's behalf, calling on God to slay the wicked, and celebrating the speaker's "perfect hatred" for those who hate God. From marveling at how profoundly God knows, the speaker suddenly displays how little God is truly known in return. Before we ridicule and distance ourselves from such an absurd parody of God's mercy and compassion, we should pause for a moment and wonder if this isn't exactly how we think when the blood rushes to our head and we boil with anger with our own self-righteousness – which we invariably persuade ourselves is the righteousness of God. In a curious way this furious digression only underlines how complex is the relationship between knowing and loving. Because here the speaker claims ardently to love God, but evidently doesn't really know God at all. Love is often founded on such ignorance.

But then the speaker halts this intricate exploration of the complexities of knowing by comprehensively submitting to God's loving knowledge. The psalm started with a description ("You have searched me and known me"): it now ends with a demand: "Search me ... and know my heart." What does such an abrupt conclusion mean?

The speaker has discovered the difference between *our* knowing and *God's* knowing. With us, knowing and loving are separate, and there's always the fear that if someone really knew us, they'd have a power over us that they could use to hurt us, or that they'd see through us and cease to love us. But God's knowing is different. *God's knowing and loving are indistinguishable. There's never a moment when God knows but doesn't love, or loves but doesn't know.* That, my friends, is the gospel we can hardly begin to imagine. *God wholly knows because God wholly loves; and God wholly loves even though God wholly knows.*

Look back upon your life. Have you made knowing and loving enemies of one another? Write this psalm on your heart. Tell your friends and family to read it to you on your deathbed. Because when your life ends, it will be time for those estranged companions, knowledge and love, to be reunited in you, just as they are in God. And when you're raised to life eternal, you'll for the first time be known and loved not just by God, but by everyone else as well. That will be heaven.