

SEARCH AND KNOW ME

Psalm 139:1–24

Key Verses: 139:23–24

“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!”

When you speak to God, what do you say to him? Often we don't even bother talking to him. Or we come asking only when we're desperate. Or maybe we "just tell him what he needs to do." How we speak or don't speak to God reveals the kind of relationship we have with him. In our Psalms series this Summer we've been learning about God our Shepherd. Today we conclude the series with Psalm 139. The poetry of this Psalm is a beautiful prayer. The author talks not *about* God but *to* him, showing both intimacy and reverence. It's not dry, abstract concepts but tangible experiences, dramatic contrasts, and wondrous emotion. After mostly describing God (1–18), he briefly turns to the wicked (19–22), then ends with a bold request (23–24). What is his point? His words lead us to some important realities about God and about ourselves. But this Psalm is also limited. It doesn't tell us how to get right with God, how to live in intimate relationship with him, or how to deal with the "grievous ways" in us. So after we meditate on what these verses mean, we'll also think about how it points us to new life in our Lord Jesus. May God speak to us through his word.

Read verses 1–6. It begins, "O LORD." Literally it's YHWH, the name used for God when he made the Garden of Eden. He's the covenant God who *made* us human beings to be in relationship with him. The psalmist has experienced how God has searched him to truly know him.¹ It's God's Spirit who searches our minds and hearts.² God watches our daily rising and sitting (2). Even from afar he can discern our thoughts, including our intentions and motivations. "Searches out" means to winnow or sift out (3). God wants to know our daily habits, even our sleep times. Here, "acquainted with" isn't casual; it means to know intimately, and it's how God gets to know all our ways. God even knows the word we're going to use before we speak it (4). "Altogether" adds that he knows all about

¹ In verses 1–6, the Hebrew root word for "know" is repeated 4 times, and a similar word, another 3 times.

² 1 Cor.2:10; Rom.8:27.

that word, whether our using it is honest or misleading. “Hem me in” means we’re surrounded by God (5). He even lays his hand upon us, to show us his authority, possession, and protection. Reflecting on all this, the psalmist says, “Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it” (6). Why does God, the Creator of all things, so intensely want to know all about just one human being? Partly, it’s because each human is his masterpiece (13–14). But we are not just fancy objects. Nor is God being nosy, or like an interrogator. As we’ve said, because he’s the covenant God, he wants to be in a *true relationship* with us. When we want to have a relationship with someone, we’re genuinely interested in everything about him or her, right? And we’d like the person to get genuinely interested in us, right? The same is true with God and each human being. He’s looking closely at every aspect of our life, especially into our heart, to see if we’re interested in him. His Spirit is “contending with” us, to turn us from the world, the flesh, and the self, to enjoy fellowship with him (Gen.6:3). In almost every verse in this Psalm we find the words “you” or “your,” and “I,” “me,” or “my.” God allowed the psalmist to experience such intimacy with himself to show how he longs for each of us to be in a personal relationship with him.

Next, the psalmist’s language becomes stirring. Read verses 7–12. Whether he’s in the heights or in the depths, the psalmist exclaims, “You are there!” (7–8) The discovery is exciting! God’s presence is his Spirit, which is everywhere, at the same time, in all creation. Wherever he goes, the psalmist always finds God’s presence, wherever he is, to lead and hold him (9–10). Again he mentions God’s “hand”—which is there not to discipline, but to lead and protect him. Even in darkness he finds the light of God’s presence (11–12). Darkness is scary and depressing. But even the deepest darkness doesn’t scare or confuse God—he sees everything in it just fine, as if the lights are on. His presence is even there, as a shepherd going after the one he’s pursuing. Why is the psalmist telling us God is everywhere? Partly, it’s to reassure us. In the exciting places and the dull ones, the loneliest places and the scariest ones, God is always present, to lead, protect, and comfort us. And his presence everywhere means he is always watching us. He sees even when we try to hide from him in darkness, wherever we go in our minds and hearts. God is holding each of us morally accountable, looking for our integrity. Why? Because without accountability and integrity, we can’t have real intimacy with God.

Then the psalmist goes deeper. Read verse 13. The emphasis is not his inward parts or his mother's womb, but on the One who formed and knit him together. He's describing God's sovereign will in the unique way he made him. Since God made him, he belongs to God. Read verse 14. As he sees God's handiwork in himself, he says he's fearfully and wonderfully made. Doctors who study the human body attest to this. The Hebrew says, "I am fearfully set apart." There's holiness and intrinsic dignity in each human life, because we are made in the image of God. Seeing God's sovereign work in the way he made me heals me of both pride and inferiority. Then there's that word again: "Wonderful" (6). It can mean difficult, extraordinary, or marvelous. The psalmist sees himself as one of God's difficult, extraordinary, marvelous works. Then he adds, "My soul knows it very well." It's why he says, "I praise you..." Read verse 15. It was happening secretly, but God could see it, and in fact God was doing it. "Intricately woven" literally means "embroidered." God does this uniquely beautiful thing, bringing various elements together into a person's body and soul. Read verse 16. In his sovereignty God also designs all the days of our lives even before they happen. Why does the psalmist describe how God made him and how he has a plan for all his days? It is to help people like us encounter God as our personal Creator. It's why God wants to have such intimate knowledge of us, why he wants to be in a relationship with us, why he holds us accountable. God who "knit us together" and "intricately wove" us means we're not insignificant or worthless; we are God's "divine design." We each have meaning, purpose and value to God. The fact that we are a living human being is a testimony to the power and wonder of God. And because God has a plan for each day of our lives, we don't have to worry or be anxious about the future, but live each day personally trusting him.

Then the psalmist pauses to reflect. Read verses 17–18. He's been considering all these "thoughts of God" and exclaims that they are "precious." This word can also mean "weighty," "hard to grasp," or "mysterious." All put together, these thoughts of God are vast, more than grains of sand to be counted. Trying to ponder them all may have even put him to sleep. But when he awakes, he finds he is still with God. It tells us that life at its end is not an empty, meaningless void, but the presence of a personal, loving, faithful Creator. Why does the psalmist stop and consider God's thoughts? It's not merely for speculative knowledge. He's considering how close God wants to be with him, how much God wants to guide him, how valuable he is to God, and how accountable. And he wants to respond with deep appreciation, affection and love.

In light of his love for God, he turns to the realities around him. Read verses 19–22. Living among violent people who hate God, speak against him, treat him with contempt, and rise up against him, is hard, especially if we truly love God and want to honor and glorify him. It always has been hard, ever since people began to call upon the name of the LORD (Gen.4:26b). The psalmist is not being emotional; he just wants nothing to do with the God-haters.

Then he comes back to what he said in verse 1. Read verses 23–24. Every sentence here is an exclamation. The psalmist desperately asks God’s help to show him what’s wrong with himself. “Grievous way” is literally “painful way.” It means a way of his that causes pain to God’s heart, or pain to the people around him. It’s called “hidden faults” (Ps.19:12), sins we commit unintentionally or unconsciously. They are our “blind spots.” So often we hide or ignore what’s wrong with us, or even defend ourselves. But the psalmist wants God to show him his faults, his sins against God and others, so that he can repent and ask forgiveness. It’s another expression of his love for God.

What does all this mean to us today? We live in a secular world where people live as if God were not there. In it, we all form godless habits of thinking and living. As we ignore God’s reality, we become futile in our thinking and our foolish hearts are darkened (Rom.1:21). We put self at the center of life and give our minds and hearts to the wrong things. We become more and more unaware of God, unaware of ourselves, unaware even of right and wrong. But as we turn to God, we begin to see how real he is, how deeply he knows us, how present he is everywhere, how fully he’s involved in our lives, and how accountable we are to him. Then we begin to see how sinful we are. Even if we haven’t done anything about them, there are things in our heart and thought world we’d be so ashamed of if others knew. There are certain days, recorded in God’s book, we’d like to forget, not because they were hard but because on those days we did some evil things. If God knows all my past, and all the foulness within me now, how could he possibly want anything to do with me? Who gets to be close and intimate with the Holy God without getting destroyed?³ Yet our amazing God still longs for a relationship with us. And he himself provided a way.

³ Ex.33:20; 1 Sam.6:20; Isa.6:5; 59:2; Mal.3:2.

God the Father sent his holy Son Jesus to come into this sinful world in human form to open the way for us to come back to him. This is possible only through his suffering, death and resurrection. If we repent of our sins and accept by faith that his death paid for our sins, we receive the Holy Spirit; we're forgiven, cleansed, and have a living hope in his kingdom. This is the gospel of the glory of Christ (2 Cor.4:4). Ephesians 3:12 tells us that in Christ, we now have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him. It's why Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life..." (John 14:6a). Now, with confidence we can draw near the Holy God with a true heart, in full assurance of faith (Heb.4:16; 7:19,25; 10:22). After being changed and renewed by his grace, we don't try to use God to get what we want. Instead, we enjoy this amazing relationship with him. As we learn to keep his commands, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit come to dwell in us (John 14:21,23). We come to know him not conceptually, but personally, even better than the psalmist did. This is how Psalm 139 is fulfilled. In Jesus, we experience the deep love of the Father, and we become one with him (John 17:21-23). We enjoy intimacy with God in the Spirit, an intimacy we never imagined. He fills our hearts with love for God and others. God wants to restore each of us in this intimate relationship with him, because we are his creatures, and he loves us so much.

In this relationship we realize God isn't just trying to use us; he really is interested in us as a person. He knows all about us because he cares for us. He sees each person as if he or she were the only person in the world, because he made each of us as his own wonderful creation. In Jesus we come to know the only true God, and myself as his finite creature, made and sustained by him. We come to know that life is totally in his hands. In Jesus I see myself as "his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works..." (Eph.2:10). I see my life under his sovereign control. I see him in all aspects of life, in all places, at all times. This knowledge of God reshapes my way of thinking and my heart, from godless to godly. Instead of trying to flee from his presence, I long to be with him.

What's more, in Jesus we actively start pursuing personal holiness out of love and reverence for God. Read verses 23-24 again. Why should we pray like this? It's asking God to help us see what's going on inside us. But why do we need to know? Some people get too engrossed in self-examination. But the point of this prayer is to ask God to expose to us anything within us that's displeasing to him, like a lustful obsession, an idol of greed we've been harboring, or an

arrogant, ugly way of treating others (e.g. Col.3:5). We call this self-examination “the pursuit of holiness.” As love for God in us grows, we truly desire to be more pleasing to him. We start asking him to show us our own “grievous ways” so that we can walk in his light and have the blood of Jesus his Son cleanse us from all sin (1 John 1:7). Holiness is not just about my own inner purity; it’s about my obedience to God and about the way I treat and influence the people around me. An old hymn called *An Evening Prayer* goes like this: “If I have wounded any soul today, If I have caused one foot to go astray, If I have walked in my own willful way, Dear Lord, forgive.” As our relationship with our Father God through Jesus his Son becomes closer, more intimate, his Spirit will lead us to pray like this.

So, how do you talk to God? Rarely? Only if you’re desperate? To teach him? Or do you come to tell him how much you love him, how you enjoy his presence, how thankful you are that he knows and cares for you so deeply, how you need his help to be more pleasing to him? Let’s read verses 23–24 again. May we come closer to God through faith in Jesus and ask him to show us what we need to change, so that we can grow in real intimacy with him.