

Psalm 139 (1984 NIV) ***Knowing the God We Worship***

Introduction

On 23 April 1962, the renowned Swiss-German theologian, Karl Barth (1886-1968), spoke at Rockefeller Chapel on the campus of the University of Chicago.

It had been reported that during the Q & A time, a student asked Karl Barth if he could summarize his theology in a single sentence. Barth was reported as replying, "In the words of a song I learned at my mother's knee—'Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.'"

Whether or not this story will ever be historically validated or not, the statement itself is a biblical and theological truth that is basic yet so essential to us. It tells us that no matter what our experiences and circumstances in life may be, the Scripture reassures us that God loves us and is ever present with us in Jesus Christ.

(<https://www.reformation21.org/blogs/jesus-loves-me-this-i-know.php>)

In the same way, if you and I want to experience God's sure presence and surpassing peace in life's crisis, we too need to know and to hold fast to some basic truths about God all the time. These truths are basic not so much because they are easy to be fully understood or lived out. These truths are basic simply because we need to believe in and hold fast to them time and again if we are to remain strong in faith, especially when we are going through difficult times.

The Psalmist of Psalm 139 (traditionally believed to be David) wants us to know two basic things about the God we worship in his psalm.

I. Know that God understands us so completely (vv. 1-6).

- 1 O LORD, you have searched me and you know me.
- 2 You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar.
- 3 You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways.
- 4 Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD.
- 5 You hem me in—behind and before; you have laid your hand upon me.
- 6 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain.

The people of the world today have been so disconnected by the COVID-19 pandemic and yet so interdependent on one another. It now does not depend only on what we do or what we don't, but also on what others do or what they don't. We may know and understand for sure what we ourselves need to do,

but we cannot know and understand for sure what others will or will not do. Therefore, people still have a long way to go in terms of knowing and understanding one another.

You think of the conflicts today between India and Pakistan, and that between the Israelis and Palestinians. Nearer to home, think of the internal conflict in Myanmar today. Or even the disagreements we have with our closest neighbour Malaysia from time to time. So, you have people who are literally neighbours living side by side, but really they are so near yet so far. What they are saying to each other is this, “You just don’t understand us.”

I remember talking with two teenagers one time—a boy and a girl. I asked the girl, “What is one peer pressure you face in school?”

She answered, “Following what others are doing. You want friends; you want to be accepted; but you don’t really want to do what they are doing. It’s a struggle.”

Immediately the boy countered, “Come on, you don’t have to do what they are doing if you really don’t want to.”

The girl cried out, “Oh! You just don’t understand!”

I then asked the boy the same question, “What is one peer pressure you face in your school?”

He replied, “Doing well in exams. I’m in a top school; everyone is going for A’s. You just cannot fall behind.”

Immediately the girl retorted, “Come on, you don’t have to do what others are doing if you really don’t want to.”

And the boy cried out in exasperation, “Oh! You just don’t understand! Your school is not like my school!”

For those of us who are married, we like to believe that the one who best knows and understands us is our spouse. But the fact of the matter is that we still have to say to our spouse time to time, “Now, you just don’t understand me.” Isn’t this true?

“You just don’t understand me. You just don’t know how I feel.” We all say these words to one another time to time—child to parent; wife to husband; colleague to colleague; friend to friend; leader to follower. We say these words because people don’t understand us in the way we would like to be understood. Therefore, we may think that even God doesn’t understand us too.

Does God really know and understand us? Listen to what the Psalmist says in Psalm 139:1-6. In v. 1, he says, “O LORD, you have searched me and you know me.”

The word “search” here implies “to dig into in order to examine carefully”. Hence, the Psalmist is saying, “God, you have dug into me and you know me so deeply.”

God uncovered the deepest thoughts and feelings of the Psalmist by digging into him. He didn’t just remain on the surface of the Psalmist’s life. This was how God knew and understood the Psalmist so completely. This is also how the Lord knows and understands you and me so completely today.

When God searches and digs into your lives today, it means that He is not satisfied merely to be on the surface of your lives. He wants to go deep; He wants to be intimately and intensely interested and involved in you, like a father probing his child out of parental concern. But the child might misunderstand that as parental persecution!

Yes, whether you like it or not, the Lord is intimately and intensely interested in you and wants to be involved in your life. The Psalmist says in v. 4 that the Lord knows and understands you so completely that before a word is on your tongue, He already knows it.

Story is told of an elderly couple who sat lovingly side by side on the veranda bench. It was a beautiful, moon-lit evening.

Pointing to the moon above, the man said romantically to his wife, “Dear, under the moonlight your teeth look just like pearls.”

His wife responded with a frown, “Who’s Pearl? And what were you doing with her under the moonlight?”

Isn’t it true that in spite of all the efforts we put in to express ourselves, people can still miss our message and misunderstand us completely?

Not so with God. In fact, before you can even say a single word, God already knows and understands you so completely. How do you feel about God knowing and understanding you so through and through? Perhaps, you feel so intimidated and even naked—it’s like God scanning you with X-ray eyes, and He sees you through and through.

No wonder the Psalmist declares in v. 6 that “such knowledge (of God about me) is too wonderful for me ...” This doesn’t mean that he is always good and righteous, and so he is not afraid to be known by God through and through.

Rather, it means that the Psalmist feels so wonderfully free to be totally real and honest with God. After all, you can’t hide anything from God, can you? He

understands why you're so insecure about some things. He understands why you're struggling with a temptation day after day. He understands why you are what you are.

Indeed, there's one basic truth about God that the Psalmist wants us to know and hold fast every day of our lives. It is this: *Know that we worship a God who understands us so completely.*

There's a second thing that the Psalmist wants us to know about God.

II. Know that God loves and sticks by us so steadfastly (vv. 7-18).

Today, border closure may have kept the COVID-19 virus at bay to some degree, but it has also separate people from one another no matter how well-intentioned it is supposed to be. So this may be a necessary measure, yet somewhat unfortunate at the same time.

Sometimes, separation is because of choice instead of circumstance. E.g. we may want to separate ourselves from God because we think He is no fun to be with. So, we want God to keep His distance and leave us alone, especially when we are enjoying all our worldly fun in life.

Now this question—"Does God ever separate Himself from us?" Listen to what the Psalmist says in vv. 7-18.

7 Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?
 8 If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.
 9 If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea,
 10 even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.
 11 If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,"
 12 even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.
 13 For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb.
 14 I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.
 15 My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth,
 16 your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.
 17 How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!
 18 Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand. When I awake, I am still with you.

The Psalmist here takes a flight of imagination as he tries to play hide-and-seek with God. He imagines himself trying to run away from God.

- He flees to the highest heaven, but God is there (v. 8).
- He flees to the lowest depths, but God is there (v. 8).
- He flies to the farthest end of the sea, but God is there (v. 9).
- He hides in the thickest darkness, but God is there (vv. 11-12).
- He now imagines the impossible—he goes back in time to the point when he was an unborn being in his mother's womb (v. 14). But even then, God was there! He says, "My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place ..." (v. 15), and "your eyes saw my unformed body" (v. 16).
- And as the Psalmist awakes from his fantasy, he again realises that God is with him not only in his imagination, but also when he is awakened to reality. He says in v. 18, "When I awake, I am still with you."

So, what does the Psalmist say about this God whom he tries to separate from in his imagination? He tells us no matter where we are, we have a God who sticks by us, not separate from us. Now, isn't that good news to know that no matter what, God is still with us?

In fact, God not only sticks by us no matter how bad our circumstances may be. He also sticks by us no matter how bad we have become.

- You remember Jonah in the Old Testament. He was bad enough to run away from God. But God pursued him. God stuck to him in order to use him as His prophet, even preserving his life after he was swallowed up by a big fish.
- You remember Elijah. What happened to him after he had defeated the 450 false prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel? He ran for his life because a woman (Queen Jezebel) threatened to kill him. The great hero became a big zero hiding somewhere in a cave in the wilderness. He was depressed. He was afraid. He was even suicidal. Yes, at this point Elijah's mind was far away from God. Yet God spoke to him in a still, small voice ... and Elijah heard it (1 Kings 19:12). God whispered to him and Elijah heard it.

Suppose we are all physically in church right now. And if I now whisper to you from where I am at the pulpit, can you hear me? Very likely you can't. Why? It is because I am quite a distance from you. But if I come near you and whisper into your ear, can you now hear me? Of course, you can. Why? It is because I am now near you.

In that cave somewhere in the wilderness, Elijah's whole being was so far away from God's presence. Yet he heard God's whisper so clearly. Why? Not because he had moved near God, but because God Himself

had always been near him. God had stuck by him regardless of his circumstances and complaining.

- You remember the prodigal son in the New Testament. He had turned bad in life (became a womaniser and gambler). But when he decided to return to the father (the picture of God here), it was the father (God) who first ran to embrace him, forgiving and accepting him back. Though the son had once separated himself from his father, yet the father's heart (God's heart) was always close to him.

Therefore, to have God always with us should not be an uncomfortable thought because He sticks by us not only in our bad circumstances, but also in our bad and errant ways. God sticks by us not to give us trouble, but to give us His care. God sticks by us no matter what because He loves us with a steadfast love—one that will not give up on us. Just think about it—God gave up His Son on the Cross because He refused to give up on sinners like you and me.

This then is the second basic truth about God that the Psalmist wants us to know and hold fast every day of our lives: *Know that we worship a God who loves and sticks by us so steadfastly.*

Well, if God understands us so completely, and loves and sticks by us so steadfastly ...

III. How then should we respond to God today (vv. 19-24)?

19 If only you would slay the wicked, O God! Away from me, you bloodthirsty men!
 20 They speak of you with evil intent; your adversaries misuse your name.
 21 Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD, and abhor those who rise up against you?
 22 I have nothing but hatred for them; I count them my enemies.
 23 Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts.
 24 See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

The Psalmist now explores his deepest feelings in vv. 19-24. He speaks of his hatred against those wicked, bloodthirsty men of evil. He hates them because they are enemies of the holy God. He even calls on God to slay these people (vv. 19-22). What an emotional outburst for the holiness of God. The Psalmist is angry because others have sinned against God.

But notice what he says immediately after in vv. 23-24: "Search (dig into) me, O 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."

Indeed, it is when we are feeling most angry for God that we need most to ask God to check our heart, our thoughts, and our motives. Why? It is because the sinful heart of man is so capable of self-justification, self-rationalisation, and self-deception—so much so that what seems so wrong to God can seem so right to the man. Indeed, sin in us creates deep darkness in that we can't even see and understand our true character.

The Psalmist is aware of his own sinful tendency. That is why he asks the God who understands him so completely, and who loves and sticks by him so steadfastly, to search and test him. He thinks he is angry and hates others because they have sinned against God. But then, he is aware that this may not be so. He may be angry and hating others simply because they have hurt him in some way. Thus, his prayer to God may not be a cry of righteous anger, but a cry for personal vengeance.

The Psalmist's example here teaches us how we should respond:

- **One, let this God who understands us so completely help us acknowledge the worst in ourselves.** After all, we can't bluff Him; might as well be real and honest before Him. It is like doing a disk scan on your personal computer time to time in order to clean up the system.

When was the last time you said these words to God—"Lord, you understand my deep-seated problem, my hurt, and my ugliness so completely. I want to be real and honest before you. I believe you are deeply interested in my life. So, search me and test me in order that I can stand clean before you"?

Such a confession can be relieving and liberating in that it makes you less defensive and more open to listen. You will complain less to people, "You just don't understand me."

- **Two, let this God who loves and sticks by us so steadfastly lead, keep, and move us according to His way.** In short, we must learn to trust and depend on this "sticky" God regardless of life's situations. When God leads us in His everlasting way, it implies that He doesn't just stand at the destination shouting at us, "Come on! Why are you so slow? Why are you falling and fumbling?" Rather, when God leads us in His everlasting way, it implies that He sticks with us and journeys with us to the destination—helping, guiding, and correcting us along the way.

When was the last time you said these words to God—"Lord, thank you for sticking by me even in such a difficult situation. You are always sticking by me. And with you by my side, I can see the best in my situation, and I can work the best out of it"?

- **Three, just as God has understood and stuck by us, let us do the same to one another in the Lord.** The church comprises all kinds of people. You don't always think alike, act alike, feel alike. But you must all try to understand one another, and stick by one another. Why? It is because you are all here worshipping the God who understands you so completely, and loves and sticks by you so steadfastly ... even though He is not always pleased with what you are doing. Indeed, how the perfect God Himself relates to imperfect people like us is our example as we relate with one another in all our human imperfections.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic may have made our relationships today more and more impersonal. People today may seem more and more isolated from one another (we call it "social distancing" today). But I call on us to bear this 2-in-1 good news about God in our heart, mind, and spirit as we look forward to Christmas.

- One, we have a personal God who knows and understands us so completely.
- Two, we have God as our constant companion who promises to always stick by and walk with us.

As we prepare to celebrate Christmas in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, Scripture reassures us that God wants to be very personal as well as to be very present with us even when human relationships seem so distant and impersonal these days. That's why God sent Jesus Christ, who is also called Immanuel (God with Us), to our world on that first Christmas Day more than 2,000 years ago. He wants us to know and worship Him as our ever personal and always present God with Us in Jesus Christ regardless of circumstances.

So, let's respond with confident trust and committed obedience in God who knows and understands us so completely, and who sticks by and walks with us so steadfastly in Jesus Christ, so that we can live as His salt and light in our world that's facing so much uncertainties and challenges.

Would you now bow your heads with me?

- Be real and honest before God, and ask Him to search and test your inner thoughts, attitudes, motives, and feelings. Confess before God as He reveals certain things to you. Receive His forgiveness and come clean before Him.
- What's your situation today? Commit it to the Lord. Because we worship a God who loves and sticks by us, believe that there's no hopeless situation, but only people who have lost hope in God. Ask Him to help you trust and depend on Him; to stick by Him even as He sticks by you.

I like to give you some time now to pause and pray silently in your heart before I close us in prayer.

Closing Prayer:

Heavenly Father, the day of celebration is soon upon us! As we prepare to celebrate your Son's birth, we ask that you would slow down our rushing around and quiet down our restless spirit, so that we can be focused on the thought that Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour, is already here among us! He is Immanuel, God with Us!

We want to be keenly aware of your presence each and every moment. Help us to sense your nearness at all times and in every circumstance whether good or bad. Enable us to hear and be attentive to your still, small voice.

Show us how to dig more deeply into your heart and to know you more intimately than ever before. We want to have a greater awareness of your character, and to be more yielded to the working of your Spirit within us as you mould and use us for your purposes.

We ask all this in Jesus' name. Amen!

Before I sign off, let me wish you this—"Have a blessed Christmas! Stay safe, stay strong, and be courageous in the Lord!"