

Psalm 139:1-17

Pentecost 13, Sept. 4, 2022
Pastor Sam Rodebaugh

O LORD, you have searched me and known me! ² You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. ³ You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. ⁴ Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O LORD, you know it altogether. ⁵ You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. ⁶ Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it. ⁷ Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? ⁸ If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! ⁹ If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, ¹⁰ even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me. ¹¹ If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night," ¹² even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you. ¹³ For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. ¹⁴ I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. ¹⁵ My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. ¹⁶ Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them. ¹⁷ How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!

Walk through most public cemeteries and you'll see grave markers of all shapes and sizes and materials. But whatever the design or composition, almost every grave marker has the same essential information: The name of the deceased. The date of birth. The date of death. Ironically, it is the little dash between the dates of birth and death that symbolizes the entire story of the deceased person's life: successes and failures, joys and sorrows, loves and losses, triumphs and tragedies, their sitting and rising, their every thought, word, and deed—all lumped together in that one little dash.

In 1996 a woman named Linda Ellis wrote a poem about the dash on a tombstone. Part of the poem reads: *"I read of a man who stood to speak at the funeral of a friend. He referred to the dates on her tombstone from the beginning to the end. He noted that first came the date of her birth and spoke the following date with tears; but he said what mattered most of all was the dash between those years. For that dash represents all the time that she spent alive on earth. And now only those who loved her know what that little line is worth."*

Well, today's text, Psalm 139, reminded me of that "little dash," particularly because of the words of verse 16: ***"In your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them."*** The dash is the story of our lives, but more importantly, it is the story of how our loving God is with us from the beginning to the end. In essence, Psalm 139 describes four important attributes of God, and how they relate to the all-too-brief "dash" of our lives. And so, the theme we'll be considering today is:

The Little Dash Tells the Story:

- I. God knows me
- II. God is with me
- III. God is for me
- IV. God loves me

You may remember terms like *omniscience*, *omnipresence*, and *omnipotence* from your confirmation days. Today, I want us to review these wonderful attributes of God and then examine how they apply to our personal lives. We're going to be talking about these attributes of God found throughout this

Psalm, viewing them in intensely personal terms. So, when we say God is omniscient, that means He's all-knowing, and how does that affect me? Well, it means, "God knows *me*." Omnipresence means God is always present, and that means, "God is with *me*." Omnipotence means God is all powerful, and that's a great comfort because the Bible tells us that "God's power is always at work in *my* life." And then the Bible also describes God as merciful and gracious, which simply means: "God loves *me* too."

So, let's start with that idea that "God *knows me*." How well do you know others? We may think that we know other people pretty well, but really we overestimate our knowledge. You know that, because people surprise us all the time, and then we say things like, "I didn't think he was like that." And we also don't know ourselves very well! You may know what you want, but do you know what you truly need? You may think you have all the answers today, but will you think the same way tomorrow? The truth is, none of us know anyone as well as we think we do, including ourselves. Even in the closest of relationships—after ten, twenty, even fifty years of marriage—we still don't know everything about our spouses, do we? We might know them better than anyone else, but we can't know everything.

But God *does* know us completely. That fact is stated and restated throughout the first six verses of our text. For instance, the Hebrew verb translated as "***You have searched me***" in verse 1 has the idea of "digging deep." The verb translated as "***You search out***" in verse 3 also means "to scatter," like scattering wheat with a pitchfork—scattering in order to sift through it and investigate. Also in verse 3, the basic meaning of the verb "***acquainted***" is "to inhabit or dwell"—in other words, the type of intimate knowledge that comes from living together in the same house or family. "***You hem me in—behind and before,***" in verse 5—could be paraphrased, "God knows me backwards and forwards."

The same idea is expressed again and again to emphasize the fact that God's knowledge of us encompasses every detail of our lives: He knows when we sit down and stand up (v. 2), He also knows all our "ways" (v.3), when we lie down for a nap (v.3), and our every word before we even speak it (v.4). And God knew all these details about us from eternity, before the universe ever existed, before we were born, before our parents, grandparents or great grandparents were born, even before Adam and Eve tasted the forbidden fruit—God knew you.

Who can fathom such complete knowledge? It's so overwhelming, we can't even imagine it. So it's no wonder David exclaimed in verse 6, "***Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it.***" That's just what the Apostle Paul was thinking when he exclaimed in Romans 11: "***Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!***" (Romans 11:33). God knows each us completely. And how does this reality impact our daily lives? On the one hand, it should remind us that we can never fool God.

Sometimes we may think we can hide our thoughts from God. When we feel guilty over some sin, it can be easy to start avoiding God in church, in our prayers, with the thought that perhaps if we never approach God then He won't be thinking about us and our sin. If we ever think something like this, we couldn't be more wrong. As David says, "***Before a word is on my tongue, behold, O LORD, you know it altogether.***"

And so, it's for good reason that we brought our sins to God this morning in confession: "***O Almighty God, our Maker and redeemer, we poor sinners confess unto You that we are by nature sinful and unclean and that we have sinned against You by thought, word, and deed.***" And how great it is then to hear that forgiveness from God: "***Almighty God, our heavenly Father, has had mercy upon us and has given His only Son to die for us and for His sake forgives us all our sins.***"

If God's complete knowledge of us is sobering, even more than that, it is encouraging. There might be those times when you're in the midst of so much suffering that you wonder if God has forgotten about you. You couldn't imagine what He has in mind through it all. But God does understand. God does see. God does hear. God understands, sees, and hears because He is the omniscient God—the God who not only has intimate knowledge of us intellectually, but He also experienced our suffering when our Savior walked on this earth among us.

The letter to the Hebrews declares of Jesus: ***"We do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need."*** (Hebrews 4:15-16) In that perfect understanding of us, throughout the all-too-brief dash of our lives, God will never confuse our wants and needs. God will never let us suffer more than we can bear.

Because **God is with you** constantly. One of my favorite Bible stories is the life of Joseph. Here was a young man whose circumstances appeared to go from bad to worse. Do you know anyone like that? Are you someone like that? Joseph was resented by his own brothers, cast into an empty cistern, then sold into slavery. He would never again return to Israel, until his remains were brought home in a casket. His refusal to commit adultery with Potiphar's wife resulted in a lengthy, unjust imprisonment.

Yet, significantly, throughout the story of Joseph's life and misfortunes, the Bible repeats the same statement. When speaking of his enslavement in Egypt, the Bible states, ***"The LORD was with Joseph and he prospered."*** (Genesis 39:2) When speaking of his imprisonment in Pharaoh's prison, the Bible states, ***"But while Joseph was there in the prison, the LORD was with him."*** (Genesis 39:20 NIV) In good times and bad, the LORD never left Joseph. And in good times and bad, the LORD never leaves us.

As with God's omniscience, His omnipresence is both sobering and comforting. We can say, "God is with me." That's what David said, ***"Where shall I go from Your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from Your presence?"*** Now, that does mean that we can't run away from God. We can't go someplace where God won't find us. Ask Jonah. Ask Moses. They both knew about that. And that could be a scary thought. But consider the comfort as well. In the difficult times of our lives, we are always tempted to believe that God has deserted us, but He never does. Though we often try to run from Him, He never runs out on us. When we get a promotion at work, He is with us. When we lose our job, He is still with us. In sickness or health, poverty or wealth, highs and lows, from the moment of conception to the moment of death, throughout the "dash" of our lives the Almighty God is with us.

So, not only does God know you completely, God is also with you constantly. And additionally His almighty power is always at work in your life. David refers to that power of God in very personal terms in verses 13-14. ***"For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well."*** (Psalm 139:13-14)

Every Sunday, we confess, "I believe in God the Father almighty." If you've seen the images circulating from NASA's James Webb Space Telescope, you've seen the infinite space scattered with countless galaxies, stars, and planets. The images are beautiful to look at. Imagine the power behind one "Let there be," that created the universe in all its vastness, splendor, and glory. Or if you've ever stood atop a mountain or looked out over the ocean, you can't help but stand in awe of God's creative power. But David marvels in a much smaller creation, the creation of individual life. And if you're a parent, you know the awe in seeing those little faces for the first time—so fearfully and wonderfully made.

So, you may be sick. You may be suffering. You may be struggling to save a marriage. You may be worried about bills or relationships or your own sinful failings. But know this: The Bible tells us that God is at work in our daily lives, using the same almighty power shown at creation, the same power with which Jesus Christ was raised from the dead. You may not always see that power at work with the eyes in your head. But you will see that power at work with the eyes of your heart. This too is an absolute, undeniable promise of God, given to you in Scripture.

Paul wrote to the Ephesians: ***“For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know Him better. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which He has called you, the riches of His glorious inheritance in the saints, and His incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of His mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised Him from the dead.”*** (Ephesians 1:15-20)

Now, when I began this sermon, I stated that I wanted us to view the attributes of God expressed in Psalm 139—His omniscience, His omnipresence, His omnipotence— and to view them in a personal way. God knows *me*. God is with *me*. God is for *me*. And the one question remaining is “why?” *Why* should God want to know me? *Why* should God want to be with me? *Why* should God want to exercise His almighty power in *my* life?

David provides the answer in our last verse, saying, ***“How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!”*** There is another way to translate that verse; it could also mean, ***“How precious also are your thoughts about me, O God!”*** You see, it’s not just the way we think about God, but even more important are the precious thoughts God has for us—that everlasting love that moved Him to sacrifice His Son, Jesus Christ, in our place to take away our sins. That everlasting love that has God preparing a place just for us with Him in heaven, accompanied by the promise that He will return for us, so that we can be with Him always, even after this brief “dash” of life is done.

Now do you still remember that poem by Linda Ellis about the dash on a tombstone? I want you to listen again to this one line: *“For that dash represents all the time that she spent alive on earth. And now only those who loved her know what that little line is worth.”* Well it is the love of our gracious God and the price which He paid for you which lends such infinite worth to the little dash of our lives. That is the same love that will follow us into eternity. Our days will not end with that final date marked on our tombstones, for we will live with God. In Jesus’ name, amen.

“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:7) Amen.