

Keep on Running

Psalm 139

Have you ever watched a moth or a similar insect around an electric light or a fire? The insect is attracted by the glow, and comes in closer. But as it comes in, the heat is too intense, so it flies back out. But once out, it is too cold and it is again attracted by the light, so it flies back in again, and you watch this poor insect repeat that cycle almost endlessly.

I wonder if some Christians don't look like moths to a heavenly observer. Moth Christians. Christians desire to draw near to God to know him and love him. As we do so, we find that the sight of God's holiness reveals our sin, imperfections and wrong loves. Guilt and shame follow, and with it, the desire to hide from God (Genesis 3:9). As we break off communion, or refuse to confess our sins, we live in self-imposed leanness of soul, being starved of our soul's nourishment: God himself. Eventually the spiritual hunger pangs are intense enough for us to return to God, seeking communion. God delights in the return of his wandering children, and restores us, where we can begin beholding him again. Unfortunately, for many, here the cycle begins again.

For many Christians, their Christian life feels like a lot of hiding from God. Yes, they read the Word, they come to church, but a lot of time and effort is expended in distracting themselves from thoughts about God, procrastinating so as to avoid an appointment with God, finding other things to do instead of meeting with God, and trying to avoid that sense that God is calling us to talk with Him.

When we live like this most of the time, we become guilty of a kind of practical atheism. In theory we believe there is a God, but in practice, we do everything we can to avoid Him, to avoid relating to him, to avoid communing with Him.

Three thousand years ago, a man after God's own heart, a man who had known what it is to run from God for over a year, wrote a psalm. Psalm 139 is about the futility of hiding from God. Why not run from God? Why not avoid God? Why not push Him out of your thoughts? Why not elude Him? Why not conceal things from him? Why not treat Him impersonally?

David's going to tell us why. And as he does so, he will give us the remedy for being moth Christians.

David is going to show us how well God knows us. He is then going to show us how fully God surrounds us. Thirdly he'll show us how personally God has shaped us. When he's finished, we have a choice: keep on running, or throw ourselves open to the God who already knows us.

I. God's Knowledge Searches You

O LORD, You have searched me and known me. 2 You know my sitting down and my rising up; You understand my thought afar off. 3 You comprehend my path and my lying down, And are acquainted with all my ways. 4 For there is not a word on my tongue, But behold, O LORD, You know it altogether. 5 You have hedged me behind and before, And laid Your hand upon me. 6 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; It is high, I cannot attain it.

David says, you, Yahweh God have searched me, and known me. In our technological world, we would say, God has scanned me. He has thoroughly scanned me, and knows me. Not that God searches to find out something He did not know before. For God the searching and knowing are

immediate and simultaneous.

When someone like God scans you, how thoroughly and deeply does He know you?

Verse 2 tells us: *2 You know my sitting down and my rising up; You understand my thought afar off.*

God knows you in all the acts of your life. Sitting down and rising up. Your acts of rest and your acts of work. Your passive acts, and your active acts. Your casual acts and your deliberate acts. Every deed you do, God knows it. He knows every action you have ever made in your life, and every one you will make.

God also knows your thoughts. When the psalmist says “You know my thoughts afar off”, it doesn't mean God is afar off. It means when my own thoughts are afar off from me, when they are still distant, vague, taking shape, when I hardly have recognised what it is I'm thinking, God already knows it. God knows the kind of thoughts I think, their origin, and where they will lead.

We still don't exactly know how thoughts happen physically. We know thoughts belong to the soul, but how they are transposed into the physical matter of the brain isn't completely understood. The brain has around 100 billion nerve cells or neurons, which are interconnected with trillions of connections called synapses. On average, every one of those trillions of synapses sends one signal per second, but some can send as many as 1000 per second. And somehow, that's producing thought. But God knows every one.

Do you know God saw your first thought, whatever that was? And He will see your last thought on this earth before you close your eyes in death.

Which of us has not feared the idea of having our thoughts read by another, or having them displayed on a large screen? If people knew our thoughts, we fear they would not want to associate with us. If they knew the adulteries, the hatred, the despising, the lusts for control, the envy, we'd never be able to show our face in public again.

But God has seen every one.

Sometimes we complain that people have misjudged us or been wrong about us because they don't know our good thoughts. We say, “He doesn't understand what I meant to do!” or “She's criticising me, but she doesn't know what's in my heart!”

Well, there's one who will never make the slightest error in judging you. He knows every motive, every desire, every longing, every ambition, every plan. He knows perfectly why you did what you did, and he can perfectly judge what was good and what was bad in your thoughts.

Our thoughts turn into actions, and verse 3 tells us that He knows all our ways.

Psalm 139:3 You comprehend my path and my lying down, And are acquainted with all my ways.

The word translated *comprehend* means to observe, search out, scrutinise, discern. Whether my actions are action of habit, or whether they are done by accident, whether I am doing them openly, or whether I am doing them in secret, He knows them all.

That even includes the action of lying down – of resting, of sleeping.

It's a strange feeling as a parent, when you watch your children sleep. Sleep is one of our most vulnerable states: we're basically unconscious, horizontal, just about anything can be done to you. And which parent hasn't looked down at their sleeping children and just observed them.

Do you realise that God has done that to you every time you slept? While your eyes closed, His remained on you. He never sleeps, nor does He have to take His eyes off you to look at someone else.

He knows your thoughts. He knows your actions. Verse 4 tells us He knows your words as well.

For there is not a word on my tongue, But behold, O LORD, You know it altogether. (Psa 139:4)

Some people are in the habit of finishing other people's sentences for them. I know what you're going to say. But sometimes we, or they, get it horribly wrong. It wasn't what we were going to say. But God never has that problem. While I am still deciding on what I will say, while the words are forming in my heart, God knows what you will say.

That applies to prayer. *For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him. (Mat 6:8)*

No one will ever get to say to God, "I never said that!" Every word, including every idle word, is known by Him.

He knows our words. He knows our thoughts. He knows our deeds. When someone knows you like this, it is as if He has completely surrounded you. Some of the scanners at the airports do a full scan right around you, front and back.

The psalmist says in verse 5, You have hedged me behind and before,

In other words, your knowledge of me is as if you have enclosed me, encircled me, hemmed me in. Spurgeon said, "We cannot turn back and so escape him, for he is behind; we cannot go forward and outmarch him, for he is before."

And in scanning us like this, He is not impersonal. Verse 5 says – you have laid your hand upon me. That can be the hand of a judge, frogmarching you to prison, or the hand of a father, comforting you. But either way, He sees. He knows you with a perfection of knowledge that far exceeds your knowledge of yourself. And He is involved personally.

Verse 6 is a common reaction.

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; It is high, I cannot attain it. (Psa 139:6)

To try to imagine someone who knows you this intimately, this exhaustively, this minutely, this unerringly, this continuously is staggering. It is tiring just to try to imagine it.

It is more than tiring. It is unnerving. And to the sinner whose conscience is not fleeing to Christ, it is downright frightening. And so, haunted by the truth that God sees us, and knows our thoughts, and our words, and our actions, we begin to run. We try to hide. We might not be able to screen ourselves from His penetrating gaze, but maybe we can get somewhere where His gaze doesn't reach. If we are so naked and revealed in His presence, then maybe we can escape from His presence?

That's the next part of David's song. David knows that not only does God's Knowledge Search you,

II. God's Presence Surrounds You

7 Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? 8 If I ascend into heaven, You are there; If I make my bed in hell, behold, 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 fall on me," Even the night shall be light about me; 12 Indeed, the darkness shall not hide from You, But the night shines as the day; The darkness and the light are both alike to You.

Trying to hide my words, thoughts and deeds from God is useless, and trying to hide from His physical presence is even more futile. Where could I go, David asks. In verse 8, whether I go through the first heaven of the clouds, or the second heaven of the cosmos, or the third heaven of God's throne, God is there. Travel to the known edges of our universe, 14 billion light years away, find the place where even light has barely reached, and you have not moved an inch away from God.

Go down to the depths, go to the centre of the Earth, go beyond that to the place of the dead- Sheol, to the suffering pit of Hades, and you have not escaped God. Is God in hell? Of course He is. Not His blessings, or His sweetness, but His presence. Those who think they will escape God in Hell will be terrified to realise that Hell will be a manifestation of God's holiness. Perhaps the fire of God's glory warms those in heaven who love Him, and burns those in Hell who hate Him.

A heathen philosopher once asked, "Where is God?" The Christian answered, "Let me first ask you, Where is he not? (John Arrowsmith, 1602-1659)

What about speed? Maybe you can move so quickly that you outrun God.

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.

The wings of the morning is an image which picture the sunrise, with dawn breaking, and the light of the sun in a moment come flying over the land, and reaches the furthest reaches of the sea. The idea seems to be, if I could catch a ride on the beams of light, if I could travel at lightspeed, would I then outpace God? Could you move so quickly He could not keep up?

Verse 10 tells us – even there, it would be God's hand leading, God's right hand holding. He made the light, sustains it.

Well, if we cannot find a place that eludes God's presence, or outrun God's presence, perhaps we can simply avoid being seen by Him. Perhaps we can skulk away, disguise ourselves.

If I say, "Surely the darkness shall fall on me," Even the night shall be light about me; Indeed, the darkness shall not hide from You, But the night shines as the day; The darkness and the light are both alike to You. (Psa 139:11-12)

Have you noticed? What time of day do people prefer to commit acts of wickedness? Even in an age of all kinds of electric lights, people still prefer the cover of darkness for sin. It's not only criminals. I've often wondered what would happen to nightclubs if they were forced to become dayclubs, with big bright windows installed. End of the party. Darkness has an age-old attraction to the human conscience, as if somehow my sin is less visible, less noticeable.

But David says, God sees you as well at night as He does in the day. God does not need physical light to bounce off an object and stimulate His retina in order to see us. That is how we see. But God's presence and knowledge of us doesn't even need light to see us perfectly.

Your darkest deed in your darkest hour done in the darkest place, was as clear to God as if it were done at midday in plain sight.

David is showing us how futile it is to run from, and hide from the God who knows you.

And yet people still try. There is Adam, trying to find a spot in the Garden where God won't find him. There is Jonah, heading as far west from Nineveh as possible, thinking that perhaps the ocean will put distance between himself and God.

"Am I a God who is near," declares the LORD, "And not a God far off? "Can a man hide himself in hiding places, So I do not see him?" declares the LORD. "Do I not fill the heavens and the earth?" declares the LORD. (Jer 23:23)

What about us? When we avoid our appointments with God be it on the Lord's Day, or be it in private prayer? Or when we keep swatting away the conviction of the Holy Spirit, and keep on running. We add more work to our plate, or more to-do's onto our to-do list, or we turn the music up louder, or we surf another website, check our email or Facebook again, find something else to watch. It's still running. It's still imagining we can find a place, or a speed, or a time when God won't be there, and He won't see, and He won't know us.

But it is futile. Nothing is hidden from Him, because His presence surrounds us. And it is a personal presence. It demands a personal response.

In the ancient world, there was one place which seemed the most hidden of all, the place of complete darkness. That was the human womb. Before the era of ultrasound, it was a human in secret, in pitch darkness, nine months in the making, unknown by anyone, not even if it was he or she, one or two.

But no, David says, this is not the one place where you escape God. In fact, here it gets even more personal.

III. God's Purpose Shaped You

13 For You formed my inward parts; You covered me in my mother's womb. 14 I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Marvelous are Your works, And that my soul knows very well. 15 My frame was not hidden from You, When I was made in secret, And skillfully wrought in the lowest parts of the earth. 16 Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed. And in Your book they all were written, The days fashioned for me, When as yet there were none of them.

For You formed my inward parts; You covered me in my mother's womb. (Psa 139:13)

In this dark, unseen place, God was not excluded, or inactive. No, God, you formed, you shaped me from the inside out. The word for covered is the word knit, or weave. There in the womb, God was weaving you. I was listening to a doctor lecture on this, and he pointed out that in fact the collagen fibres that make up our skin are really a weave of interlocking fibres. And because they are weaved one way, our skin has elasticity. The eyeball is also a weave, but because the fibres are weaved differently, it is firm. Before you knew your name, before you had the idea of "me", God was weaving you.

David does the right thing. He acknowledges that what God does in the womb is a work of art

I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Marvelous are Your works, And that my soul knows very well. (Psa 139:14)

It is amazing. Even unbelievers still speak about the miracle of birth. The fact that we can now see inside the womb has not removed the mystery, it has only increased it. We now know of the amazing processes that allow one egg to be fertilised, carried, implanted, and then through the

genius super-organ called the placenta, receive food and nutrients from the mother, without ever having the blood cells mix. The process by which the DNA dictates what will take shape, so that after 7 to 8 weeks, the basic architecture of the baby has already been formed, the limbs, organs, bones.

David says in verse 15 and 16, this was not hidden from you. You were guiding and shaping the process.

Psalm 139:15 My frame was not hidden from You, When I was made in secret, And skillfully wrought in the lowest parts of the earth. Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed.

God was shaping you. Before any human looked on you, God watched you and superintended you. Like a sculptor shaping his creation, He was there. Before even your mother or your father knew you, God was shaping you according to his purpose. He was deciding on your physical shape, your face.

In fact, He was determining the very length of your life.

And in Your book they all were written, The days fashioned for me, When as yet there were none of them. (Psa 139:16)

Wouldn't it be scary if you were given the exact amount of days you're going to live, along with how many of them you have lived? But God knows those numbers. This all-seeing, all-present God knows you.

So David has simply described for us what is. He has not embellished it. This is reality, This is the universe you live in. You live in a universe in which God made you personally, with purpose. He knows you completely and intimately, word, thought and deed. And there is nowhere to go, nothing you can do that can escape His presence, His scrutiny and His knowledge of you.

So that leaves you with two choices. The first choice is to ignore what David has said about God's presence, God's purposes and God's knowledge, and act as if you can conceal yourself from God. You keep on running. You live the life of the practical atheist, who puts God at the very margin and edge of his life. You ignore your conscience. You keep up the distractions. Make God into an impersonal idea, and keep Him at arm's length.

But that is a kind of moral insanity. It is suppressing the truth. It is shutting your eyes to what you know is in front of you. It is ignoring the elephant in the room.

The second choice is the choice David makes.

David embraces the truth that this omnipresent, omniscient, personal God is always thinking about him.

17 How precious also are Your thoughts to me, O God! How great is the sum of them! 18 If I should count them, they would be more in number than the sand; When I awake, I am still with You.

You can't shield yourself from Him. You can't outrun him. You can't act as if He did not make you and plan you. So you embrace it. You rejoice in the scrutiny of God. You take refuge in the forgiveness of Jesus Christ, hide yourself in the covering and cleansing merits of His Son, and then bask in the sunshine of God's continual love for you.

And when you trust in His love for you in Christ, you will come to love what he loves and hate

what He hates. That's what's going on in verses 19-22.

19 Oh, that You would slay the wicked, O God! Depart from me, therefore, you bloodthirsty men. 20 For they speak against You wickedly; Your enemies take Your name in vain. 21 Do I not hate them, O LORD, who hate You? And do I not loathe those who rise up against You? 22 I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies.

By coming to know God, David loves what God loves, and hates what God hates. His heart is increasingly beating with God's.

But then verses 23 and 24 really summarise the response we are to have to a God who already knows us, whose presence surrounds us, whose purpose fashioned us.

Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me, and know my anxieties; 24 And see if there is any wicked way in me, And lead me in the way everlasting. (Psa 139:1-24)

In verse 1, David began by saying, LORD, you have searched me and known me. Now he says, search me, and know me. What is going on? David knows that God already knows him. But this is what love does. Love opens itself up to be known. Love unveils itself. Love deliberately reveals itself. Yes, David has been known passively by God. But now he actively throws open his life to God.

When I became interested in my wife-to-be, I started finding out some things about her from other sources. But when the time came for our friendship to begin, she voluntarily told me things about herself. Some of those I already knew, but that it was coming from her to me, made all the difference. She was actively revealing her person to me.

That is what David does, and it is what this Psalm is meant to produce in us. Since God already knows me perfectly, no sense in pretending, faking, concealing. Since I cannot hide from Him, no sense in running, distracting, avoiding. Since He shaped Me, no sense in pretending He isn't interested in me personally. Instead, yes God, you are here. You see Me. You know Me. Here I am. Just as I am. Show me my sins that I might confess them. Show the right way, the way everlasting, so that I might do it.

We don't like people staring at us. But David had become comfortable with God's stare. That's what it comes down to. God you see. You have always seen. You see me inside out. I can go nowhere where you do not see.

So I am comfortable with you seeing. And I want you to know me at all times.

Don't be a moth Christian. Embrace the Gospel of being accepted in Christ. Then enjoy the gaze of God on your soul.