

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Canadian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_canadian-journal.php

Psalm 139: An Exposition

S. B. FROST

I

LORD, thou hast searched me and known me." Part of the price we pay for living in this twentieth century is that even the classic devotional passages present their intellectual problems to us. If we are to gain the leisure of mind in which to ponder these writings profitably we must first face the problems and reach an intellectually honest answer. Only then can we banish our reservations and surrender wholly to the direction of wise men of religion, whether their writings be in scripture or without.

"Lord, thou hast searched me and known me." We view the passage with some perturbation. The psalmist dwells with happy wonder on the intimate and detailed character of God's knowledge of his outer and inner life. Can we still share his faith that God knows each one of us as intimately as that? The universe has in our generation become a strange and unfamiliar place. The nightmare world of science-fiction is rapidly becoming the stark reality with which we must learn to live. The astronomer tells us that our earth is but one planet in the solar system, which lies in the outer areas of a great belt of stars, containing thousands, probably millions of suns such as ours, all with their attendant planets. This great disc of flaming worlds, naively called by us "The Milky Way," appears itself to lie in the outer suburbs of a vastly larger universe, which we know contains untold myriads of galaxies, systems, and nebulae; and the chance that none of their planets are habitable is so remote as to be negligible. If inhabitable, then they are probably inhabited. If space-travel becomes a reality in the next generation or so, as it surely must, then our children and grandchildren are going to explore a universe full of unpredictable phenomena.

This new concept of the universe does not, however, make it any harder to believe in God. What it does is force us to try to conceive the grandeur of God afresh. If the God in whom we have hitherto believed is outdated by such astronomical phenomena, then clearly the terms in which we conceived him are far too small, and we must humbly revise all our thinking. We must reckon seriously with what we have always paid theological lip-service to: our inability to encompass the infinity of God. Because the Johannine tradition is that Jesus said, "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father," we assume that we know all about God; but scripture recognizes that even after we have seen the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, there is still a great deal that remains hidden. It was Karl Barth who said that all revelation is christological, not scripture, and some of that hidden mystery is revealed, from time to time, for his creation

continues to declare the glory of God to those who have eyes to see. We theologians need to be respectful to the astronomer and his fellow scientists, for it is they who in our generation are the prime guardians of the doctrine of *Deus Absconditus*, and who bring us from time to time further knowledge.

It is also they who come to our aid in our present devotional exercises. We are not here concerned to argue theological theses for their own sake, but only to clear away our inhibitions before we enter on an understanding of the psalm as a religious document. Our hesitation is whether we can honestly say, "Lord, thou hast searched me and known me." In such a vast universe can any one individual claim the particular attention of the God who has such multiple and immense concerns? Is there not something too ludicrous, even for religious faith, in turning from the contemplation of such a universe as the astronomer shows this to be, and saying, "And the God who keeps it all in being has a personal concern for *me*"? The scientist assures us that it is not at all ludicrous. He insists that this is a universe, not a multiverse. The same forces which operate on the great nebulae also determine the structure of the atom. The wisdom which planned the solar system gives the same attention to the construction of each and every snowflake. If we think that the God of the outer spaces cannot have an individual knowledge of the millions of men and women on this planet, and possibly an individual knowledge of untold creatures on other planets also, then once again our understanding of God is too small. We are presuming that God is fenced about by our limitations. The human mind can only have one main object of attention at any one moment. Human love can only be given in any personal and individual sense to a relatively few persons. But we must beware of imposing such human inability on God. He can comprehend all things simultaneously. He can rule this vast universe and at the same time germinate a single seed. The wonders of his works are revealed by the telescope, but they also are disclosed by the microscope. The God of the universe is one very likely to be concerned with the lives of individuals.

There is a human analogy which may also be helpful. In our families, the only child is often seriously disturbed by discovering that he must share his parents' attention with a new-born brother. But he soon learns that while the attention is divided, the love is not. Love is not subject to mathematical laws, whereby two can only have half of what one alone would enjoy. Each child in a large family receives his parents' whole love. If we consider that on other planets, other creatures may share in God's attention; or if we recall that our planet is swarming with millions of men and women, hidden in the jungle of the Amazon, exposed on the steppes of Siberia or crowded in the cities of Europe; even so we can still confidently assert with the psalmist that God has a personal, particular, intimate knowledge of each one of us. Each can say "Lord, thou hast searched *me* and known *me*."

And now—our arguments ended—we can observe that it is not surprising they led where they did, for the religious man is by his own experience

compelled to make this affirmation. One of the basic facts of religious experience is that the individual is deeply aware of the particular and providential care which envelopes him. "Yahweh is my shepherd, I shall not want," avers another psalmist; and Jesus said, "Your heavenly Father knows you have need of all these things." Such a confidence is the holy ground on which the religious man kneels to pray. Like Naaman's two mules' burthen of Yahweh's soil, it gives him a *locus orandi*. But deprive him of the conviction that God knows him, individually, personally, by name, and you have taken away the very ground of prayer from under him and he cannot pray. We must then begin where the psalmist begins, or we cannot begin at all.

O Lord, thou hast searched me and known me!

Thou knowest when I sit down and when I rise up;
thou discernest my thoughts from afar.

Thou searchest out my path and my lying down,
and art acquainted with all my ways.

Even before a word is on my tongue,
lo, O Lord, thou knowest it altogether.

Thou dost beset me behind and before,
and layest thy hand upon me.

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is high, I cannot attain it.

If this then is the kind of God with whom we have to do, and if this is the kind of knowledge which he has of us, then the whole universe is but the palm of his hand, and in every place and in every experience he is "closer to us than breathing, nearer than hands or feet." An interior sensitivity to his presence is built into us as radar is built into a ship, giving it awareness of iceberg and shore and a sense of direction on the darkest nights and in densest fog. Thus whether the circumstances be those of space or of time, we never find a limit beyond which his presence is not made evident to us.

We can, if we will, turn the poetical metaphors of the psalmist into sheer literalisms. Many of us have in fact done so. We climbed thirty, forty thousand feet over the great Atlantic, and we were aware of his presence in the plane as on the ground. We have gone a mile underground into a coal-mine, and found that our prayer for protection was as natural and confident as on the surface. We have taken the wings of the morning and have been swept in less than twelve hours from the very heart of Western civilization to stand quite alone on a bush airfield, surrounded only by the impenetrable African forest, and waiting to face we knew not what—but though all familiar things were altered and the very sun had acquired a new and violent character, nevertheless the God to whom we turned for reassurance had not changed. Although familiar surroundings, loved ones, and all

that we held dear had been left far behind us in our flight, he had not removed. With him, there is neither near nor far but only presence.

Or, more significantly in these days when height and depth and distance no longer retain their former meaning, we can translate the metaphors of the psalm out of space and into time, for time not only retains its old significance but for our generation is becoming daily more meaningful. There is the time of the solar system and there is the time of the universe; there is the time of a nation and there is the time of a soul. There is both *chronos* and *kairos*. Of these we are here concerned with the time of the soul, and especially of those moments when *chronos* is heightened and intensified into *kairos*; that is, when some inner development of the personality relates itself to some meaningful coincidence of external event and together they build up for the individual into an experience in which time loses its successiveness and becomes endowed with a permanence which gives it an eternal quality. Such moments come but rarely, but they are unforgettable. We recall those highest and holiest moments of human love, when sun and moon and earth stood still; we view again that scene of awesome beauty, when only the poetry of Wordsworth could begin to suffice; we hear again that music of the "Eroica" which reached down to make vibrant our inmost being; we remember that moment of achievement when after long years of endeavour the thing was done—the printed book was in our hands, the house was built and paid for, the professional qualification was ours. As we look back, we see that what lifted that moment out of successiveness and into eternity was that in that experience he had drawn very near. "If I ascend to heaven, thou art there!"

There are those other moments. We relive that fragment of time when surrounded by gowned figures we lay isolated on the operating table, looking up at that immense dark eye which soon would glare down upon those disclosed secrets of our own body which we ourselves can never know, and in that moment of unprotected loneliness, we were aware as the darkness descended that it as the shadow of his wing. The moment of bereavement, the moment of disillusionment, the moment of sinfulness recognized for the first time, these were not abysmal for all their awful depth, because even there the uplift of his hand was perceptible, and we said, "underneath are the everlasting arms!" "If I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there." God knows us, and we know him—everywhere!

Whither shall I go from thy Spirit?
 Or whither shall I flee from thy presence?
 If I ascend to heaven, thou art there!
 If I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there!
 If I take the wings of the morning
 and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
 even there thy hand shall lead me,
 and thy right hand shall hold me.

Even so, the psalmist knows that in our foolishness we have often tried to evade God. Like our father before us, we have tried impulsively to hide from him in the garden of life, or like the poet we have over a long period made a serious and grim business of running away from him.

I fled Him down the nights and down the days,
 I fled Him down the arches of the years,
 I fled Him down the labyrinthine ways
 Of my own mind. . . .
 From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.¹

Some of us fled because we feared that to know God, to be aware of his presence in every experience, would debar us from life's more exhilarating phenomena. We disliked his discipline, his morality, his "Mrs. Grundyism," and so we ran away and hid in good spirits and gaiety and jazz. But not the most insistent drumming can drown that still small voice, which asks "where are you, Adam? What is this far country, famine-stricken and friend-barren, in which I find you?"

All which thy child's mistake
 Fancies as lost I have stored for thee at home.
 Rise, clasp My hand and come!

For others of us, it was our sense of shame which drove us to hide from the Holy One. However competent and successful we might seem to the world, and however assured to our friends, we knew that we had failed our own ideal and also knew full well that that ideal itself fell far short of the glory of God. Saints and mystics there might occasionally be among the millions of the human race, and for them there were doubtless spiritual adventures and personal achievements—but not for lesser mortals such as we. So we turned from religion to social betterment and we joined service clubs and community associations and became busy do-gooders; or perhaps, turned cynics, we set out steadily to make money. But neither good works nor getting ahead ever quite filled out the loneliness within. We remained disconcertingly aware of God, and we were never sure when some chance beauty or some moral challenge might not bring him home to us again. Not even the dark shadows of our self-distrust could wholly hide from us the thought of the high and the holy and the transcendently beautiful. The veiled truth breaks forth, ever and anon, to dazzle and bewilder us, as the lightning brilliantly discloses the whole night sky. There is no way of escaping him.

If I say, "Let only darkness cover me,
 and the light about me be night,"

even the darkness is not dark to thee,
 the night is bright as the day;
 for darkness is as light with thee.

1. Francis Thompson, "The Hound of Heaven."

II

Our psalmist has so far asserted two fundamental propositions. The first is that God knows me personally (vv. 1-6). The second is that I know God, inescapably (vv. 7-10). He presents these as elemental facts of man's experience—not of man as church-going, disciplined and instructed, *vir religiosus*, but of man as *homo capax dei*, natural man with his unnatural, unique capacity for being aware of God. What strange relationship is this, of a Creator who knows his creature, and of a creature who uncannily knows his Creator?

It is in the light of this relationship that the psalmist now looks at the wonder of his own being. There he also sees reflected the surpassing wonder of God. This is no mere "higher anthropomorphism," though we have long since recognized that this is the one source left to us from which to draw our theological thought-forms. We call God Father, we speak of him as personal, we ascribe to him understanding, purpose, love, because we know of no other categories in which to begin to express him. The *analogia parentis* is the only possible one, as the Church acknowledged when she deserted the metaphysical terms of the Logos-christology to return to the filial metaphors of scripture. All this is true, but what the psalmist is saying is something rather different. It is said that a cathedral once had a chancel roof so fine and so rare that no eye could grasp its elaborate pattern except when the baptismal font was filled, and its waters reflected the roof in their circle, and there one could see the whole design in its simple symmetry. Thus, too, in the wonder of his own being the psalmist sees reflected the surpassing wonder of God. He is saying: "He knows me, and I know him. Then in the strange miracle of myself the junior, fallible, human partner, lies a clue to the divine partner, to the ineffable mystery of God himself. Since I am in relationship of mutual knowing with him, I must be in some measure a revelation of his Being." "I am fearfully and wonderfully made" is an inspired mistranslation and "Thou art fearful and wonderful" is an equally inspired emendation, and together they express both aspects of the psalmist's thought.

He contemplates the wonder of his intricate physical being. The sheer skill required to compose so complex a creature as the psalmist knows himself to be argues for the close attention and regard which God must have given to the task. As the designer of an advanced machine has an unrivalled knowledge of its intricate complexity, born of the hours when he hung over the drawings, studied the performance of the sectional working-models, and slowly assembled the prototype, so even more the Creator of this harmoniously-articulated living organism knows his creature through and through.² From the fertilized ovum to the mature man, the Creator has carefully watched his whole development, and in the complexity of the

2. In v. 14 RSV has departed from MT pointing (reading *yādha'tā* for *yodha'ath*). I think this is right in view of the psalm as a whole, but the change should have been noted in the margin.

creature and in the Creator's knowledge of his handiwork the ineffable wonder of the Divine Knower is reflected.

The psalmist is, however, aware of himself as something more than a physical organism. "The days that were formed for me" were all thought out and provided for, so that he commenced not merely upon a physical but also upon a spiritual development of maturing experience. He was created to be one who has "days," the successive moments of experience which build up into memory and character and become personality; he was designed to be one who could look back and forward in time, and who could gaze around him by virtue of that self-awareness which enabled him to make the fundamental distinction of self and not-self. It was this, too, which enabled him to look up and distinguish between the human "I" and the divine "Thou." It was this that enabled him to know God, and be known of him. "How precious to me are thy purposes (*rē 'eykhā*), O God." The psalmist lives a planned and providential life, because his Creator has thought it all out for him. The totality, the final end of the divine concern for him, is indeed beyond his reckoning!

But one thought is insistent. We have to remember that this is an Old Testament saint, for whom orthodoxy decreed that Yahweh had no further interest in men when death had overtaken them. But religion is often more far-sighted than theology, and conviction often runs deeper than orthodox opinion. The psalmist cannot think that any power or experience can destroy this relationship of mutual knowing. He phrases it obscurely because it is a new realization, which has long been maturing in the depths of his thought and now rises explosively to the surface: "When I awake, I am still with thee!" For all who have encountered it, the experience of knowing God and being known of him is the strongest argument that physical death is not the end but a beginning. The God who can stoop down to enter into this relationship of mutual knowing surely could not be content, simply because of the phenomena of death, to unknow his known-one. The religious man is persuaded that neither life nor death nor any other power can dissolve this relationship of divine-human knowing.

Here then is the mirror, the physical and spiritual wonder of man from conception to the eternity that beckons beyond the grave, and therein the mystery of God is reflected:

For thou didst form my inward parts,
thou didst knit me together in my mother's womb.

I praise thee, for thou art fearful and wonderful.
Wonderful are thy works! Thou knowest me right well;

my frame was not hidden from thee, when I was being made in secret,
intricately wrought in the depths of the earth.

Thy eyes beheld my unformed substance;
in thy book were written, every one of them,

the days that were formed for me,
when as yet there was none of them.

How precious to me are thy thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!

If I would count them, they are more than the sand.
When I awake, I am still with thee.

III

But as the knowledge of God is no purely academic exercise of intellection, the mere cognitive act of grasping the concept "God," but is rather a personal relationship of a demanding I-Thou quality, so too the reception of that relationship or its denial is not simply a matter of inconsequential opinion; it is rather the existential choice. A man chooses to know God, and through him a providential universe, and a kindly discipline of moral challenge; or on the other hand, he chooses not to know God, and thereby lives in an environment at best indifferent to his welfare, and devoid of moral values and responsibilities. Making the latter choice, the only considerations a man observes are those that serve his own appetites or his instinct for self-preservation. He is in fact the masterless outlaw of the bad lands of existence. Between him and the man who accepts the ultimate values of right and wrong there is a great gulf fixed. It is the ancient demarcation between the Sown and the Unsown, the separation of the unobligated Bedu, whose only defence is his ability to survive, and the feudal tenant, who has his place in an ordered existence, and is well aware both of the protection his master affords him and of the obligations laid in return upon him. It is the clash of the wilderness and the civilized community.³

Our psalmist recognizes this fundamental separation of mankind. He knows the division of the truly free from the lawless, the distinction between those who know God and accept his rule, and those who live in the wilderness and know no law. He asks that the difference between these two may always be clear to him. We miss any missionary zeal to win the wayward and the lost, but we do him an injustice if we impute to him any personal vindictiveness. He is not primarily seeking anyone's death, but is asking that basic issues of right and wrong may be made clear and that right be

3. Because there are tyrannies, and there is a servility born of fear, we have sometimes been misled into thinking of masterlessness as freedom, and of the liberty without which man is no longer man as constituted by the absence of obligations. The untrammelled life of the desert has been exalted at the expense of the land-tied serf. But this is to confuse the issues. A man with no concept of an ordered cosmos, wherein he has his accepted place, is the lawless man, the enemy of society. His apparent freedom is in fact caprice, and his seeming liberty merely a will to survive. Community life begets obligations, and it is only in responding to such obligations that personality can develop. All art has its discipline, and no great music can be composed in disregard of fundamental principles. Freedom lies not in being undisciplined but in having a right discipline freely chosen. The immigrant to the City of God is truly a free man.

vindicated. Above all he asks that he himself may never be in any doubt where he stands. He knows God, and God knows him! Let this always determine his choice! He is in effect saying with Joshua: "Choose this day whom you will serve . . . but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord!"

O that thou wouldst slay the wicked, O God,
and that men of blood would depart from me,

men who maliciously defy thee,
who lift themselves up against thee for evil!

Do I not hate them that hate thee, O Lord?
And do I not loathe them that rise up against thee?

I hate them with perfect hatred;
I count them my enemies.

IV

And now the psalmist's thought comes full circle. "Lord, thou hast searched me and known me. . . . Search me, O God, and know my heart!" You have known me, but now go on to know me, ever more thoroughly!

The whole psalm, as we can now see, is a variation on the theme of knowing. The Hebrew word has an even fuller range of meaning than the English. The lower levels are the ordinary acts of cognition, as when David realized (knew) that Saul was plotting to kill him (I Sam. 23:9), and the meaning can rise to "have insight, discern, evaluate between," as when the woman of Tekoah tells David he has angelic wisdom "to discern (know) all things that are on the earth," that is, he is not misled by appearances but can get to the heart of the matter. But its distinctive quality emerges not in the process of knowing facts but in that of knowing persons. Jehu tells his fellow-captains concerning Elisha's emissary, "You know the fellow and his talk," meaning an understanding of that type of person, not a personal acquaintance with him. For this latter there has to be a mutual relationship, and this involves an element of decision. You may give yourself to such a knowing, or withhold yourself from it. Thus to know someone in this more personal sense means that you have distinguished him from your more general acquaintance, and "to know" means in such circumstances "to choose." God said of Abraham, "I know him" (Gen. 18:19), and to Jeremiah, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you" (Jer. 1:5), and to Israel, "You only have I known of all the families in the earth" (Amos 3:2). In each case the translation should employ the verb "to choose." To enter deeply into this kind of relationship means the dropping of the barriers of your own personality and an exploration of the inner life of the other. Thus "to know" is used of the intimacy of husband and wife. "Lord, thou hast searched me and known me. . . . Search me, O God, and know my heart!" It is the authentic language of love. What we have in this psalm

is indeed a love-poem, free of all eroticism, but genuinely irradiated with the joy that comes from deep affection, warmly given and satisfyingly received.

Search me, O God, and know my heart!
Try me and know my thoughts!

And see if there be any wicked way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting!

This then is the thought of the psalm: "God knows me, intimately, personally. And I know him, everywhere, inescapably. In the wonder of what he has created me to be, I also see the surpassing wonder of what he is. His knowing me is infinite, and my knowledge of him cannot be ended, not even by death. There are some who refuse to know him. May I always recognize them for the enemies they are! But I know him, and he knows me! Lord, know me more and more!" The poem has come to end where it began.

But there is one thing more to be said, only half-glimpsed perhaps by the psalmist, but fully expressed by St. Paul in the other great biblical poem of love. The last words refer to "the way everlasting," *b'dherekh 'olām*. It is, as the RSV marginal reference reminds us, the ancient, the familiar, the well-trodden way, the way of discipline, the way of obedience and of that happy service which is perfect freedom. But as the psalmist has already hinted it is also a new way, a way of eternity, *'olām*, a way unexplored, a way which begins on the further side of the sleep which we call death. It is therefore a way leading into the awakening dawn of new experiences. For eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor has it entered into the heart of man to conceive what awaits us in that way. But we can be sure that it leads to further enjoyments of knowing God. For here we see him as in a mirror darkly, but there face to face. Here we know only in part, but then we shall go on to know *as we have been known*. For now there remains only faith and hope and love, and the greatest of all things is that knowledge of God which is love.