

God's Knowledge

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Martyn Lloyd-Jones (a Welsh preacher) maintained that almost all our problems come down to an ignorance of God. If we knew who God really is, that awareness would have a deep impact on our lives. Let us consider a specific example: God's "omniscience." Is the teaching that God is all-knowing merely a matter of intellectual interest, or does it have profound practical implications? What are the practical benefits of meditating on the nature of God's knowledge? Do we really want God to know us?

God's exhaustive and constant knowledge of us could be regarded as either a threat or a comfort to us, depending on how you look at it. I once walked into an Egyptian restaurant and everyone there looked up and stared as if to say, "What are you doing here?" It wasn't a comfortable feeling. I've heard that one of the greatest fears people have is of public speaking. Other people are staring at you and making judgments about how you look and everything you say and do. Jean Paul Sartre, the atheist existentialist philosopher, in his play, *No Exit*, portrays hell as a room where you must live in the presence of other people, unable to sleep or even close your eyes. You are always under their gaze—exposed or reduced to an object. Towards the end of the play, Sartre concludes, "Hell is other people." In another place, Sartre said that if God were always watching through the cosmic keyhole, then Sartre couldn't be free. God's gaze can be a threat if you don't want to be seen.

On the other hand, there are times when we want to be seen. My boys want me to come to their soccer matches so I can see them play. They want me to see them when they are in a play. When they are afraid, they want their mother or me to be present with them. There are times when it feels good to be with a friend, to not be alone.

God is always watching. He knows everything about you. He knows who you really are. He knows your secrets. God does not ignore details. Even a sparrow does not fall to the ground without the Father's knowledge and permission (Matt. 10:29). God even knows the number of hairs on your head (Matt. 10:30). Proverbs 15:3 says, "The eyes of the Lord are in every place, watching the evil and the good."

Psalm 139 is a classic psalm that ponders God's knowledge and presence. David knows that God has searched him and known him (vs. 1). God knows "when I sit down and when I rise up" (vs. 2). He knows "my path and my lying down (vs. 3). God knows my thoughts before I do, "even before there is a word on my tongue... Thou dost know it all" (vs. 4). He knows the meaning of what I say even when I am not aware of the various motives behind my words. The Lord is behind me and in front of me (and on both sides as well) (vs. 5).

The next verses are particularly poignant for me. I went to high school in Australia—Carey Baptist Grammar School. We had a regular chapel time. One of the unique institutions there (I have never seen it anywhere else) was a talking choir. They would read scripture verses with the same intonation. One of their favorite passages was Psalm 139. They used to say these verses in a lilting fashion that is unforgettable to me. "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 dawn and



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dwelt in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there Thy hand shall lead me, and Thy right hand shall hold me" (vs. 7-10). Our talking choir read this passage in a light, breezy fashion, particularly emphasizing the "wings of dawn." However, I wonder if there was any ambivalence in David's thoughts. After all, there was no escape from the presence of God. If I were to travel at the speed of light ("wings of dawn") I couldn't get away from Him even if I wanted to do so.

Thieves often like the cover of darkness. That's why lights in a parking lot or automatic lights around houses are seen as a deterrent. Perhaps we might be so foolish as to think that we could hide from God in the darkness. David considers this option:

If I say, "Let only darkness cover me and the light about me be night, even the darkness is not dark to Thee and the night is as bright as the day; for darkness is as light with Thee" (vs. 11-12).

At the end of the Psalm, David prays a classic prayer, "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 everlasting way" (vs. 23-24). Why does David ask for God to "search me" (vs. 23) when he knows that God has already searched him (vs. 1)? I suppose it is because David wants to embrace and accept God's knowledge of Him rather than to attempt (however futilely) to escape from Him. It is also because he wants to know what God knows. He asks God to "try" him, put him to the test, and let David see what God sees. He wants to see his own sinfulness ("wicked way"). One Puritan writer said that David did a lot of courageous things. He fought a lion and a bear. He fought Goliath with a sling shot. But, the most courageous thing David ever did was to pray this prayer. He was asking God to let him undergo trials so that his sinfulness would come to the surface, and that he might know what God already knows about him. How could he be so bold as to pray that prayer? Probably it was because He trusted in God's mercy and compassion and that he believed that God intended to lead him in the "everlasting way" (vs. 24).

But what are further practical implications of meditating on God's knowledge?

First, as we consider the vastness of God's knowledge, it should lead us to praise Him. David says, "How precious also are Thy thoughts to me, O God! How vast is the sum of them" (Ps. 139:17). Similarly, the apostle Paul bursts into praise as he considers God's acts in history (Rom. 9-11 especially):

Oh the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has become His counselor?... For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen (Rom. 11:33-36).

Second, knowledge of this truth should also be a help in temptation and a motivation to holiness. We should be ashamed to sin in God's presence. One of the things that made David's sin so awful to him was that the adultery and consequent killing of Uriah was done "in Thy sight" (Ps. 51:4). People are kept from sin because someone they respect is watching. Would you do the worst thing you have ever done in front of your parents or your children? We are ashamed to let others know our sins, yet are often indifferent about what God may think of us—as if He is not watching. In ancient times, Linnaeus wrote over the door of his library, INNOCUE VIVITE NUMEN ADEST—Live Innocently, God is Present.

Third, God not only sees our sins but also the right intentions of our heart. It is easy for us to give the best of all possible motives to ourselves and attribute to others the worst of all possible motives. When people misjudge us, it is a comfort to know that God knows the true state of affairs. When American Puritan Jonathan Edwards was removed from his church, he preached a farewell sermon. He said that God knows the truth, and that they all would meet in the future before God's judgment, where every untruth will be revealed. Edwards placed his trust in God's knowledge when slandered.

Fourth, God's knowledge ought to lead to our humility. After all, what is our knowledge compared to God's? Steven Charnock says in his book, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, "We have infinitely more ignorance than knowledge." No matter how much you know now, there are vast amounts that you do not know.

Fifth, beware of attempting to usurp God's omniscience. We can be overly curious about the things of God. When someone asked Augustine what God was doing before He created the heavens and earth, he replied, "He was in Himself." When another asked him the same question, he answered, "He was building hell for such idle, presumptuous, fluttering and inquisitive spirits as you." Remember also, that the root temptation of Satan in the garden was not only to deity ("You shall be as gods," Gen. 3:5) but to knowledge. Satan said to Eve that if she ate of the tree, she would "be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:15). Let us

by all means seek knowledge, but not into God's secret counsels. Astrologers, palm readers, and fortune tellers attempt to know and control the future, usurping God's knowledge and lordship.

Sixth, God really knows and He can really be known. God's character and knowledge provide the philosophical basis for our knowledge. God is not contradictory, and His universe is knowable. Without this truth we could not trust our reason and science. There is much that is mysterious about God, but there is not contradiction in Him. He cannot be holy and not holy, good and not good, just and not just, and so on.

There is much more that could be said about the implications and practical benefits of God's knowledge, but this perhaps will stir us to consider more connections between God's omniscience and our own personal and public lives, and thus lead us to a deeper knowledge of God and ourselves.

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