

“YOU KNOW ME”¹

Psalm 139:1–24

Although [Psalm 139](#) presents some of the most profound theology in the Bible, it is “applied theology, the meaning of God for the believer in a particular situation of stress.”² Although the nature of his difficulty remains obscure, the psalmist is convinced that because God knew Him, He would help Him.³

The psalm opens with a hymn of praise (see [139:1–18](#)) which first exalts God’s omniscience (see [139:1–6](#)). God has absolute knowledge of humanity in its full range of activity: sitting, rising, traveling, lying down, thinking, speaking. He knows more than *what* is being done, He understands and evaluates the *motives* behind those actions. The word translated **perceive** implies insight, while **discern** suggests the winnowing or sifting of grain ([139:2–3](#)). Like a besieging army,⁴ God’s knowledge surrounds the psalmist. He confesses that God knows him better than he knows himself (see [139:5–6](#)).

The psalmist turns next to God’s omnipresence (see [139:7–12](#)). **Heavens and depths** (literally, “Sheol”)⁵ includes these and everything in between ([139:8](#)). **Wings of the**

¹ [Psalm 139:1b](#).

² Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101–150*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 21, eds. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1983), p. 263.

³ Because this psalm contains several words which did not enter the Hebrew language until after the Exile, some rule out Davidic authorship (but see Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73–150*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, ed. D.J. Wiseman [Downer’s Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1975], p. 464).

⁴ Elsewhere, **hem ... in** has this meaning (A. Cohen, *The Psalms*, Soncino Books of the Bible, ed. A. Cohen [London: Soncino, 1950], p. 452).

⁵ Elsewhere in the Psalms, Sheol means separation from God. These views can be reconciled by

dawn represents the sunrise and, since **sea** can mean west, **the far side of the sea** is probably the sunset (139:9).⁶ From height to depths and from the extremes of east and west, God is there. Why? To guide, protect, and hold the psalmist securely in His strong right hand (see 139:10; 138:7). What if it becomes dark? Even then there is no need to worry, for God is never in the dark (see 139:11–12).⁷

The third stanza (139:13–18) presents God as personal Creator and Custodian. The marvel of the human body testifies to the wisdom of its Creator. Perfect knowledge at work in hidden places created a beautiful tapestry, **woven** (literally, embroidered) with skill upon a **frame** (that is, a skeleton; 139:15).

He not only created the psalmist but carefully planned the psalmist's life and continued to give loving thought to his well-being (see 139:16–18). **When I awake** (139:18) implies that counting God's thoughts is a process that cannot end. All hours—both waking and sleeping—would need to be spent to accomplish this task.⁸

The hymn of praise has prepared us for the prayer for deliverance in verses 19 through 22. In spite of God's loving thoughts (see 139:17), the psalmist found himself attacked by **wicked** and **bloodthirsty men** (139:19). Adding to his injury was the fact that they failed to acknowledge the omniscient, omnipresent, personal God; they even mocked His name (see 139:20). The psalmist, by contrast, was on God's side, faithful to His covenant and loyal to the end (see 139:21–22).

The closing verses reveal the truth of the psalmist's words. God had already searched and known him (see 139:1), but He could do so again (see 139:23; the verbs are the same).

⁶ Kidner, p. 465.

⁷ Kidner suggests that the psalmist may want to flee God's presence (139:7b, 11a) because he is frightened by God's omniscience (p. 464; see 139:1–6).

⁸ This is the thought of Cohen (p. 454) and Delitzsch: "He has not done; waking and dreaming and waking up, he is carried away by that endless, and yet also endlessly attractive, pursuit, the most fitting occupation of one who is awake, and the sweetest ... of one who is asleep and dreaming" (F. Delitzsch, *Psalms*, Commentary on the Old Testament, vol. V, translated by James Martin [reprint, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978], p. 352). Allen prefers to modify the vowels and translate "come to an end" (p. 252), while Kidner suggests a reference to resurrection (p. 467).

He could even test the psalmist's inmost thoughts (139:23; **anxious** may not be the implication here). The psalmist's chief desire was to avoid the wrong path and to be led in the way everlasting (139:24). An omniscient, omnipotent, and personal God—a God who knows us—deserves nothing less. 🖋️