



Glenna shows how you are known to the core, known body and soul, known in your suffering, known when you want to give up, known in your fears and when you feel alone. Immerse yourself in Psalm 139—a transformational journey into the heart of God for *you*.

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Known to the Core

Does God Even Like Me?

When I was newly married, I started a blog. Back in 2003, blogs were still relatively novel. I found a hosting site that housed forums of blogs so you could share your work with other bloggers writing in your niche. This was before social media became what it is today, so the forums served as a mashup of blogging and networking all in one.

I loved blogging. It gave me a way to use the creative writing skills I'd honed in college, and it provided space to write for an audience. *An audience who had no idea who I was.* This was both the beauty and the oddity of blogging in the early 2000s. Like many other hobby bloggers, I wrote anonymously because I didn't want anyone I knew to find my blog and read it. And yet, I was perfectly fine baring my soul to complete strangers. I wanted to be known, but not *known*. This was controlled transparency. Writing had much less risk when there was no face or name attached to it. I could write with complete honesty about my personal life—but without any negative effects on my personal life. I could hide the parts of my personality or character

that were off-putting, so, much like the way social media works today, people didn't know me for who I truly was.

I wanted to be known. I wanted to be loved. But I feared that the one would cancel out the other.

No one on this earth, not even my husband of more than twenty-one years, knows me to the core of who I am. Not even *I* know myself that well, and I like to think I've got a pretty good handle on self-awareness! Have you ever said or done something and then immediately (with great regret) thought, "*Why* did I say that? *What* was I thinking?" Yeah, me too. We often speak or act or make decisions without understanding what led us to do so, unsure of whether that action or decision is consistent with who we think we are. It's not a strange quality to long to be known, to have good working knowledge of self, to understand who we are and why we operate the way we do. But, in our finite limitations, we just can't know everything, not even about ourselves. Omniscience is not a human quality. It's a divine one.

THE GOD WHO KNOWS YOU

When I was a small child, I read a book that explained how you could pray to God anytime and anywhere. The pages were filled with colorful illustrations of people praying in all kinds of scenarios: in traffic, at school, before bed. There was even a picture of a little boy sitting in his tree house while talking to God. Those images have stayed with me for nearly forty years because reading that book was the first time I grasped that God sees and knows everything. I was surprised to learn I didn't have to pray aloud because God hears everything, even the words in my mind and heart. But the Bible takes that concept a step further than the children's book did.

The psalmist writes, “Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure” (Ps. 147:5). There is no limit to God’s knowledge. It isn’t just that God hears our internal thoughts and words, it’s that He *already* knows them all. God knows our thoughts before we think them, our words before we speak them, our steps before we take them.

Psalm 139:1 sets the stage for the entire passage, declaring to the Lord what we know about His knowledge. “O LORD, you have searched me and known me!” This word *known* isn’t referencing a mere acquisition of facts. It’s a thorough examination, an intimate evaluation. God has seen every hidden corner of our hearts and every secret thought in our minds. He knows what’s in our hearts—truly in our hearts—better than we do.

Notice the tense here: *have searched* and *known*. God isn’t getting to know you now. He already knows you. It’s past tense. (Long past tense. Like, before the universe existed past tense!) He knows who you were, who you are now, and who you will be. He hasn’t missed anything. His knowledge of you was thorough and complete before you ever took a breath, before you were even conceived, as we’ll discuss in chapter 5.

King David, our psalmist, continues in verses 2–3: “You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways.” Here, present tense is used. God knows about our current physical activities. He knows when we’re lying down to rest or when we get up to work. He is fully familiar with every mundane moment of our ordinary days. He knows that the spot on my lower back aches while I sit on this

God is fully
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ordinary days.

hard dining room chair to type these sentences. He is aware of how many times I've paused in writing to refill my coffee, check Instagram, respond to the ongoing text thread with my mom and sister.

God's knowledge is limitless, and nothing escapes His notice. He knows about that Cadbury Creme egg I stole from the grocery store when I was five, how I feared death when I was six, how I wanted to follow Jesus when I was seven, how I began to love the Bible when I was twelve, how I wanted to go to the mission field when I was sixteen. He knows that I used to doubt my salvation daily until I understood the efficacy of Jesus' blood when I studied Colossians 2. He knows about the things I've left out of my journal for fear that someone else might read and judge. He knows me on a cellular level, understanding things about my physical body I will never comprehend. He knows about the overactive T cells that attack my spine and joints with inflammatory arthritis. What's more, He knows what each T cell looks like and how it functions. He knows how wrinkled I'll be when I'm eighty, whether I'll even live to be eighty, and the precise moment when I'll close my eyes to this world and open them to His face.

When I was eight or nine years old, I was in the car with my family, and we had stopped at a red light in the middle of town. While we waited for the light to change, I watched a woman in the car next to us. I noticed her haircut and the clothing she was wearing. I wondered where she was going and what her life was like. And then, I felt completely overwhelmed by the fact that she was a whole person with a history and a future and dreams and hopes and a life as wonderfully detailed as mine. There's a name for this sudden realization and intense awakening of your perception of others. It's called *sonder*. The dictionary defines

sonder as “the feeling one has on realizing that every other individual one sees has a life as full and real as one’s own, in which they are the central character and others, including oneself, have secondary or insignificant roles.”³ I often feel *sonder* when I am sitting in an airport or in a large crowd at a concert or conference. All these people. All these intricate details. God doesn’t just know me; He knows us all.

So, take all of that intimate past, present, and future knowledge that God has about me and you—and multiply it by billions. Trillions. I have no idea how many people have lived or will live throughout history, but He does. And He knows everything about them. From their life’s goals to the number of freckles on their skin—He has known them. From our curious idiosyncrasies to the outlandish thoughts that keep us awake at night—He is acquainted with *all our ways*. All of us. Every human who’s ever lived or will live. That’s . . . hard to grasp. (Insert a theological feeling of *sonder* here.)

God knows everything for He created everything. And He called His creation good. His creation of humans He called *very* good. But we know what happened in Eden in Genesis 3. We know that sin entered the world and that everything thereafter was tainted by it. We know that the good things God created bear the curse of sin and death. And here is where our thoughts about God’s thoughts go south. We wonder if the fall means that God’s knowledge of us is profoundly and *only* negative. When

*From our curious
idiosyncrasies to
the outlandish
thoughts that keep
us awake at night—
He is acquainted
with all our ways.*

3. Dictionary.com, s.v. “sonder,” <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/sonder>.

we take a good hard look at ourselves, we see our sinfulness and fear God thinks the worst, even in our redeemed, new-creation-in-Christ state. We don't want to accuse God of delighting in someone who sins, so we recast Him as a disapproving Father who is perpetually put out with us. What a disappointment we must be to Him! If He knows us, really knows us like this, shouldn't we be scared?

DOES GOD LIKE ME?

Psalm 139 helps us see how God's intimate knowledge of us should bring us comfort. That, in essence, is the goal of this book: to understand the blessing of being known and loved by God so that we can live confidently in His knowledge and love. We might have no trouble believing that God generally loves His people, but when we consider just how well He knows us, we struggle to believe that God loves us individually. *Me*, individually. *You*, individually. Does He even *like* us?

Maybe you've had questions like these before:

Is God's love personal?

Did He just *barely* allow me into the kingdom?

Is God perpetually disgruntled toward me?

Is He begrudging in His affection?

Did I escape judgment by the skin of my teeth?

Does God keep me at arm's length to remind me of my wretchedness?

Does He stay mad at me to keep me in my place?

Maybe you haven't consciously voiced such explicit questions, but I'll bet they've shaped your view of God in some fashion. When you know you've sinned, do you assume God is sorry He

saved you? Do you assume God loves others more than He loves you? Do you feel that you're a consistent failure in His eyes? Do you feel you need to obey to keep Him happy toward you? Do you keep watch on your spiritual disciplines with a feeling of dread?

My theology favors a strong view of God's sovereignty and providence, sometimes leaning a little too hard on our unworthiness as sinners to receive God's love and mercy. And I understand why the people in my theological circles orbit in this direction.

I've watched many professing Christians in American culture celebrate a soft, permissive form of love attributed to God that never corrects sin, that tolerates every form of disobedience, and requires zero repentance or holiness. That's *not* God's love. It's not biblical. God's love never allows us to continue in sin.⁴ To be saved by grace through faith in Jesus will mean that we are sanctified—made holy—day by day as we walk in obedience to God's commands. He will shape our minds and hearts through Scripture, prayer, the church, and His Spirit. He never leaves us to continue living in sin. As the old hymn declares, we're "saved to sin no more!"⁵

Following Jesus requires repentance because true saving faith will change the way we live. Our former lives were characterized by sin and, if that wasn't a problem, then we wouldn't have needed Jesus to die for us and pay for our sin.

But sin *was* our problem, and we *did* need Jesus to free us from it.

God's love does not permit ongoing, unrepentant sin. That said, it is a massive overcorrection to reduce God's love to something so miserly that we're not even sure if God *likes* us. Twenty-five years ago, theologian Don Carson wrote *The Difficult Doctrine*

4. Among other texts, the book of 1 John speaks strongly to this.

5. "Praise for the Fountain Opened," by William Cowper, 1731–1800. Public domain.

of the Love of God in response to the growing theological trend that emphasized a permissive and theologically weak definition of God's love to the exclusion of His holiness and justice. Carson wrote, "Nowadays if you tell people that God loves them, they are unlikely to be surprised. Of course God loves me; he's like that, isn't he? Besides, why shouldn't he love me? I'm kind of cute, or at least as nice as the next person. I'm okay, you're okay, and God loves you and me."⁶ Carson's book served as a needed correction in a day when Christians were tempted to extol God as a divine kind of Santa Claus who looked the other way when you were naughty.

To be certain, Carson's correction is still a needed word as we seek to keep our understanding of God's attributes balanced in our minds. In the years since, though, I think perhaps we've moved too far in the other direction, tipping again toward an imbalanced view of God's love as it pertains to God's holiness. It's difficult to grasp in human terms what God expresses perfectly without detracting from all His other perfect, divine attributes. He is able to be everything that He is perfectly, without compromising any part of His character. Carson says that God "enjoys all knowledge. He not only knows everything—he even knows what might have been under different circumstances . . . and takes that into account when he judges (Matt. 11:20–24) . . . God's knowledge is perfect."⁷

Psalms 139 helps us rightly understand God's perfect knowledge and investment in our lives. He doesn't know and ignore. He knows and loves. He places value on our lives as image bearers. He ordered our steps and ordained our days before He spoke the world into existence. He has always planned to save you, so your life will always matter to Him. Jesus said that God knows

6. D. A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* (Crossway, 2000), 12.

7. *Ibid.*, 50.

the number of hairs on your head.⁸ If you're like me, that number varies wildly every day. Between shedding and regrowth, the number of hairs on my head is an ever-changing integer. He knows the number of hairs on your head too. And freckles and T cells and heartbeats. Why would He bother with that kind of knowledge if He didn't love us?

Yes, God is fully aware of our sinful state. The Bible is rife with truths about the condition of the human heart. God knows:

"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" (Jer. 17:9)

"And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account." (Heb. 4:13)

"But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, 'Why do you think evil in your hearts?'" (Matt. 9:4)

"Every way of man is right in his own eyes, but the LORD weighs the heart." (Prov. 21:2)

"None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God." (Rom. 3:10–11)

The Bible always tells the truth about our hearts. And because the Bible is God's Word, God is the one telling the truth about who we are. He knows who we really are. That's *why* He sent Jesus to die in our place to bear judgment for our sins. He loved us while we were still in our sinful condition and sent Jesus to rescue us.⁹ This is real love. This is affection. It's not miserly or drudgery.

8. Matthew 10:30.

9. Romans 5:8.

It's not begrudging or disgruntled. God doesn't do anything He doesn't want to do. He cannot be coerced into loving us.¹⁰ He just *does*. Because it delights Him to do so. Read that again. God *delighted* in saving you and making you a new creature in Christ. He was *happy* to provide a way out for you.

John Piper notes the many ways that God is happy in saving sinners:

Luke 15, over and over, like four times, talks about gladness. "Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance" (Luke 15:7). We know it's talking not just about the angels throwing a party, but God himself, because in the parable of the prodigal son, that's in fact what he does. He runs out. He grabs his son, hugs him, throws a party, and says, "Come on, come on, older son. He's home, he's alive!" I mean, this father is just oozing gladness, not begrudging, as if he is saying, "I guess I have to save my son who wrecked all my property." It's just not like that.¹¹

If God oozes joy and gladness when you come to faith in Jesus, why would He suddenly change character and become a grump who stiff-arms you with His affection and delight? That's not God, my friend. He disciplines us when we sin, but He does not hold us in contempt.

Piper continues, "He never looks upon us with contempt because he's always for us, never against us. He will always restore

10. I'm indebted to John Piper for his book *The Pleasures of God*, which expounds on the idea that God is perfectly happy in and of Himself. He doesn't love us because He has to.

11. John Piper, "Is God Angry at Me When I Sin?," *Desiring God*, June 26, 2019, <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/is-god-angry-at-me-when-i-sin>.

us and bring us unfailingly to an eternity where there will be no grieving him, no quenching him, no displeasing him anymore.”¹² It does not hold true with God’s character for Him to move from someone who was happy to save you to someone who is grouchy about sanctifying you. He is not wishy-washy like we are. He doesn’t change like we do. He doesn’t come unhinged when we disobey. He is steady. Sure. Certain. Unfailing. Don’t let *your* response to someone’s disobedience color your picture of God’s response. God is not like us. When His children disobey, He does correct. But He does not lose His mind with rage. He is measured in His responses; His wrath is not disproportionately imbalanced. And His wrath toward our sin was swallowed by His Son at the cross. And it was finished. *Enough*. It will always be enough.

THE GOD WHO LOVES YOU

“Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O LORD, you know it altogether.” Psalm 139:4 removes any doubt about God’s insight into our hearts. He knows what we’re going to think when someone criticizes us at work. He knows the words that will plume into the air before we form a response. He knows the shape of the vowels and consonants before they are formed by our mouths and tongues. He knows it altogether. And yet, because He sent Jesus, He is also the God who doesn’t treat us as our sins deserve. Neither does He hold sin against us. He knows every scornful thought or angry word, but when we have believed in Jesus for forgiveness of sins, He doesn’t dangle our sins over our heads so we’ll live in perpetual regret and defeat. Rather, He loves you.

12. Piper, “Is God Angry at Me When I Sin?”

The link between knowledge and love is a biblical one. There are eleven variants or synonyms for the word *know* in Psalm 139. They connote closeness, intimacy, personal care. David's psalm about God's knowledge of us is consistent with all of Scripture. In the New Testament, Paul writes about God's foreknowledge in regard to those who would believe in Jesus for salvation and forgiveness of sins. Known as "The Golden Chain," Paul links our certain position as children of God to His love for us: "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called,

When you let all
of Scripture speak
to you of who
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God can both
know and love.

and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified" (Rom. 8:29–30).

The word *foreknew* doesn't come across in English the way it does in the original text. As in Psalm 139, the Old Testament writers used a word for *know* that implies personal interest, investment, care. In keeping with that, Paul also uses a word that communicates love.¹³ *Foreknew* means *fore-loved*. Essentially, Paul is saying God set His affections on those He would save before they ever existed. Before the universe itself existed!¹⁴ This is God's knowledge. This is God's love. Not a meaningless accumulation of facts.

God knows and loves us, and He is not repelled by the ones He saved by grace through faith.

13. I'm grateful for John Stott's helpful explanation of this passage. John Stott, *The Message of Romans* (InterVarsity Press, 1994), 249.

14. Ephesians 1:3–10.

David, our author of Psalm 139, also penned Psalm 103. When you let all of Scripture speak to you of who God is, then you begin to see how God can both know *and* love. David wrote: “As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him. For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust” (Ps. 103:13–14). God knows we are weak, and He has compassion for us. Compassion is never disgruntled. Compassion moves one to act on behalf of someone else. That’s what God has done for us!

“He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us” (Ps. 103:10–12). He has lovingly made a way for you to be forgiven and made new, to remove the stain of sin, to clothe you in the righteousness of Jesus. He wouldn’t do that so that He could then treat you as your sins *do* deserve. God didn’t save us so He could hold us at arm’s length to remind us how wretched we are. We’re not wretched anymore. We’re sons and daughters.

KNOWN AND NOT DESPISED

God knows you to the core. And He loves you anyway. If you have believed in Jesus for salvation, you have been moved from enemy to friend, hostile to holy, far off to very near. His love changes you. His love is making you what you need to be. God knew you when you were an enemy, and His love has made you a friend. A son, a daughter, an heir of all that He has. God did not happily save you to then reluctantly sanctify you. That lavish love in saving you is still present in your sanctification.

God is too happy in Himself and His glory to be brought low in attitude. He's not like us. He is constant and true, steady and unchanging in regard to you. We may leave His path, but He never leaves ours.¹⁵ We may vary in the temperature of our affections, but He never does. In Christ, you are known and not despised.

Jesus came to reveal the Father to us, to give us access to Him without fear or shame. He bore our sins in His body on the cross so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness.¹⁶ He removed the curse of sin by becoming sin for us and giving us His righteousness. This was always God's plan in saving us. Before galaxies, your salvation. Before the universe, your sanctification.

When Jesus walked the earth, He often spoke about how He was known and loved by the Father, how they were united in will and love. We are tempted to read our Bibles and think that Jesus is the kindest person of the Trinity, that He is holding back the Father's wrath. But that's neither truthful nor fair. Jesus radiated the glory of the Father to us. He was the *exact* imprint of His nature.¹⁷ We see Jesus' compassion toward the people He taught and healed, and we somehow separate that from the Father's heart. But no. Jesus' compassion for us mirrors the Father's compassion for us.

Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep" (John 10:14–15). He knows us and loves us. Through Jesus, the Father has brought us into His family. He's changed us. Sinner to saint. Far to near. Enemy to friend. Exile to heir.

15. A rephrased quote from Charles Spurgeon, *Treasury of David: A Commentary on the Psalms*, "Psalm 139" (Hendrickson Publishers, 1876), 222. "I may leave thy path, but you never leave mine."

16. 1 Peter 2:24.

17. Hebrews 1:3.

We belong to Him. So, we can live for Him. Because we are loved by Him.



for further thought:

1. If God knows every single thing about you, how does the idea of being so exposed make you feel?
2. What do you learn about God's character from Psalm 139:1–4?
3. If you have struggled to believe that God freely gives His love and does not falter in His affections for you, how can you find comfort from Psalm 103:10–14?
4. How does Jesus show us who the Father is and how He thinks about us?
5. When you are tempted to believe that God loves you less than He did when He saved you, what truths from Scripture can help you rightly view His steadfast, unchanging nature? Write them down and commit to memorizing one or two of them.

PSALM
139:5-6

"O LORD, you have searched me and known me!
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from afar.
You search out my path and my lying down
and are acquainted with all my ways.
Even before a word is on my tongue,
behold, O LORD, you know it altogether."
You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is high; I cannot attain it.

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