

He Sees You When You're Sleeping... By Rev. Jonathan A. Malone

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Psalm 139: 1-18

"O Lord, you have searched me and known me."

Mr. Paul was in prison. He was accused and under suspicion and awaiting a chance to vindicate himself. Mr. Paul was in prison labeled a prisoner, an outlaw, and a disturber of the peace. He was not a threatening man, he did not have a prior record, and he was not an overwhelming presence, yet Mr. Paul was in prison. He was in prison because he was going against the grain of the culture. He was in prison because he was trying to live a different kind of life. Mr. Paul was in prison because he found a truth about God that excited him so much and gave him such a new hope in his faith that he had to share and live the new and exciting grace that God had given to him. His approach to worship was different, his understanding of God was different, and the people in power decided that Mr. Paul needed to be silenced. So there he was, in prison, and he was scared, he feared for his life; Mr. Paul was in prison.

I open with this illustration because one way to experience this psalm is through the mind of Mr. Paul. This is a popular psalm that many turn to for devotion and comfort. But when we think of the psalm as one written by someone imprisoned, the psalm can take on different connotations and understandings. A number of biblical scholars suggest that Psalm 139 was written by someone who was indeed in prison, accused of practicing a false worship in the temple of Jerusalem, accused of going against the religious grain of the culture, but was accused unjustly. So today, think of Mr. Paul as the author of the psalm. Think of Mr. Paul as falsely accused; he took a risk and a chance with his faith and was silenced by society. Maybe he was reading the Hebrew Scriptures and began to gain an understanding of God that was forgotten. Maybe he was worshiping in the temple, and realized that the way worship was being practiced was actually getting in the way of the people's relationship with God. Maybe he saw God being used wrongly as an advocate for the rich, an advocate for those in power and those who had much, and he began to remind the people that God is actually a God for the poor and the least of society. Maybe he saw the rituals and practices of that worshiping community as actually leading away from worship of and a relationship with God.

Think of our own rebels and reformers throughout the history of Christianity, those who have threatened and challenged the church and society. Martin Luther saw how the Catholic Church could change, and was threatened more than once. John Bunyan, the author of *Pilgrim's Progress*, was a part of the early Baptist movement in England and was imprisoned for his efforts to preach and practice a Baptist understanding of Christianity and his efforts for religious freedom. Dietrich Bonhoeffer criticized the conforming church of Nazi Germany and was ultimately killed because he stood up against the grain of society. Will Campbell criticized the practices of the Baptist churches in the south in the 1960s and was cast out of the Southern Baptist culture and churches. We have a list of prophets, rebels and troublemakers who see a truth about the church, who challenge that truth, and who suffer because of their challenges.

I also invite you to remember one other figure as we journey through this psalm: Martin Luther King, Jr. On this day before Martin Luther King Jr. day, it is right and appropriate to think about this great figure. As we sit with Mr. Paul in the prison, think of MLK also in prison in Birmingham. The civil rights movement has been gaining steam; it has been making movement. At this point, King found himself jailed for protesting racial segregation in Birmingham, and he had received a letter from some other clergy asking him to cease and desist. They told him that he was pushing too hard and too fast. They told him that they feared for the health of the church and the society. What must it be like to receive such a letter from the ones you have turned to for help and advice? What must it be like to receive such a letter from those who were supposed to be considered your peers in ministry? While we do not have any kind of description on the thoughts and concerns going through King's mind, we can wonder if he felt like Mr. Paul – our presumed psalmist. He has been accused by his clergy colleagues of breaking up the church. He has been accused of walking away from the spiritual and religious path, and he has found himself in prison as a disturber of the peace. Maybe he found himself sitting in the prison feeling that same amount of despair. Maybe he found himself sitting in that jail feeling alone and wondering if he was on the right path. Maybe he was sighing, thinking that he was tired, that he was ready to sit down and quit. We don't know for sure, but for today, let's imagine that King is sitting with Mr. Paul in prison, alone, afraid and wondering where God

might be.

I imagine we can find our own places in our lives where we can relate as well. As we move through the psalm, I invite you to remember despair, remember isolation, and remember fear that you may have felt in your life at one point or another. All were most likely emotions that Mr. Paul was experiencing as he sat in that dark and damp cell, and emotions we have felt as we have found ourselves in the darkness of our own lives. The despair is heavy and great. Paul Tillich describes despair as an absence of hope; a place where you can no longer imagine what life might be like with joy and peace. Have you been in that place before? Have you looked at your own life and found yourself sighing with despair, the sigh of isolation. The sickness you are living with, the addiction you are battling, the financial struggles you face, the detachment with your children or your spouse all put you in a place that may very well seem like prison. The beginning of the movie *American Beauty* shows Kevin Spacey's character sighing, surrounded by the bars of his window, the bars of his home, and living through a life that offers no meaning. You are living through life, but you are no longer living life. Imagine and remember and claim those experiences and feelings and you can find yourself again with Mr. Paul.

Movement – God Knows Us

There in prison, in the dark, in the loneliness, Mr. Paul cries out the hope and the revelation of who God might be. "O Lord, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away." O Lord, you know that I am in distress, that I am alone, and that I am wondering if you are even aware that I am in so much distress. Do you know that I am living in pain? Do you know that I have been accused? Did you know that this would happen?

Have you ever had these questions? Have you ever wondered if God is aware of your own pain and suffering? Or maybe you have been in that place where you wonder if you are in the right? I remember there was a time when I was in a group, and the leader was saying things that were just plain wrong. The leader was suggesting that small churches were not healthy churches. Small churches were not Christian churches. Small churches were not believing churches, and it seemed that all the participants were agreeing with this presenter. I didn't feel right about any of what was said, but what if I was wrong? What if I was reacting and acting out of anger? What if I was jealous and the leader was speaking the truth? Before I spoke out, I found myself saying, O Lord you have searched me and you know me. You know if my speech is honest and true or malicious and hidden. Keep me honest and true. The Lord knows if my intentions are pure. The Lord knows if your intentions are pure. The Lord knows us and the divine knowledge can vindicate us to boldness, or shame us to change and repentance. You can imagine Mr. Paul in prison asking God if his words, if his actions were pure and true. You can imagine King wondering if he did indeed push the civil rights movement too far. You can imagine the fear and the anxiety that what if I did the wrong thing. God knows us and that knowledge can be vindicating, that knowledge can be shaming, and that knowledge can be liberating.

That knowledge is liberating when you realize that God knows your pain, and that you are not alone in your suffering. I remember when I was working with AIDS patients one of the biggest fears was to die alone, and one of the biggest frustrations was that no one understood their pain. But God knows, and God is aware of the constant aches, the burning, and the pain. This isn't sympathy. This isn't God saying, "It must be hard." This is God saying, "I know it is hard." This is empathy. God knows you more than you can know yourself.

And this knowledge is wonderful. We look at a painting and try to understand it, but only the painter can fully explain all of the details and nuances. We look at each other, and we try to understand, but only God, our creator, our artist, and our painter, can explain and know about all of our quirks and nuances. God knows us in a deeper and fuller way than our mother, our son, our father, our daughter, our sister, our brother, our friend and our pastor can ever know us. God knows your rising and you're going to sleep, your thoughts good and bad, your joys and your sorrows. Cry out with Mr. Paul, cry out with King, cry out with me from your place of need, of desires, of worries and concerns, "O Lord, search me and know me," and with Mr. Paul, God's self will be revealed to you.

Movement - God is with Us

As Mr. Paul, as we all have our eyes opened to the glory of God's knowledge of us, our hearts are opened to God's presence with us. God is with us. Do you hear Mr. Paul crying from the depth of the prison, "Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?" There is nowhere one can go, for God is here, with me and in the darkest night, when light itself becomes night, God is still there. Here in the deepest pit of Sheol, God is still with me. I may be brought down by the world, I may be mocked, I may be beaten, I may be locked up and cast out, and may be in the furthest cell, but I know that God is still with me. Mr. Paul cries out, King cries out, Bonhoeffer cries out, Bunyan cries out, we all cry out that God will not leave us no matter where we may go. The darkest night of the world, the darkest actions of the world are still light to God. No matter where you are, God is there.

Even in our illness, even in our times of struggling, God is still there. In the movie and musical *Rent* one of the

main characters, Angel, succumbs to AIDS and spends his final days in a hospital bed. But one of the redeeming aspects of the script is that Angel does not die without his friends; he is not alone. He is surrounded by his friends and his loved ones. It is just that way with God. We are not alone in our pain. We are not alone in our anxiety, and we are not alone in our despair, because God is always with us. God is still there. When I go to visit people in the hospital, at home or wherever they are in their lives, one of the main things I want to do is remind that person, and their friends and family that they are not alone, that God is still with them at their side, offering comfort and solace in the divine presence. No person can be with you always in your pain and your suffering, but God can be with you always.

Now there may be times when we wish God was not with us, and when we try to run from God. There may be times when we try to hide and hope God doesn't see us. Like Jonah on the boat, like Adam in the garden, we try to hide and avoid being seen by God. Maybe we have realized that God knows our thoughts and we are ashamed. Maybe we have realized that God was there when we walked away from a person in need and we are ashamed. Maybe we have realized that God was there when we did not speak truth to power, when we did not say no to oppression, but stood aside and let the powers and the principalities rule us, and we are ashamed. But where can we go? We go to the east, we go to the west, we go to the north, and we go to the south, and God is there. Oh where can we go to flee from God's presence because we are ashamed? There is nowhere we can go, for God is always with us, calling us to turn, to change, and to be the Christian that we are called to be. This is hopeful and this is vindicating, and this is revealing that God sees all and knows all.

The eyes of God look upon us always. The presence of God is with us always. When we fight and when we embrace, when we smile and when we frown, when we act like we like someone, and when we really do like someone. God is always with you; God is always with me. That is hope for King, that is hope for Mr. Paul, and it is hope for all of us.

Movement – God Knows where we are Going

So Mr. Paul lifts up his head from his hands, MLK begins to feel some hope in his heart, and the psalm continues. God knows where we are headed. God has written out in the book of life our plot synopsis, the thrust and the drive of our story. God knows where our actions will lead us, and has a place where we are meant to go. Maybe Mr. Paul's actions will change the method of worship in the temple. Maybe MLK's protests will lead towards changing a nation. Maybe the risks and chances you have taken will lead toward changes you never thought could happen.

Here is a tricky thing with this passage – has God planned out everything that is going to happen? This is the basic question and understanding of predestination. Does God have each step, each sermon, each thought planned out? I don't think so. I don't think God has decided exactly where and how and when we will walk, eat, sleep and do everything else. But God has a plan and an intention for each one of us. God had a plan for the psalmist, for Mr. Paul, and it may be this very psalm that gives so many other people hope. I can't say that God intended for King's house to be bombed, for King to be arrested, and for clergy to speak out against him, but God did have a plan for King to be a leader for change, justice and equality, and now racial equality is closer to our grasp than it has been in a very long time. God has a plan for you and for me, and we will be living into that plan of who we are called to be. It is a calling, a vocation, but not a well-organized story. Maybe you are called to be a parent, and maybe you aren't. Maybe you are called into finance, or into service, or into prayer. God did not intend for me to go into engineering, or medicine, but into the ministry. I took a chance; I followed God, despite the risks and the challenges, and claimed that vocation. And so here I am.

Can you imagine sitting in the cell, in despair, and then realizing that God knows you, God is with you, and realizing that there is more for you to do? Can you imagine the strength and the hope you receive when you realize that this life, these struggles are part of the struggles you have chosen. I remember talking to a missionary if he "liked" his job. He replied, "I don't know if I like it or if I don't like it, it is just who I am called to be."

Imagine that you are in the wilderness. You don't know where to go, you don't know where you are going to get your food and sustenance, but you know that God knows your isolation, God is with you in your journey, and God is leading you somewhere great. Think of this church. We are journeying, and maybe there are times when you wonder if God really understands us. Maybe there are times when you wonder if God is really with us. And maybe there are times you wonder if God has a place and a plan for us. My brothers and sisters, God knows us, God is with us, and God is leading us to a great place, a glory place, and a place where we will be the people of God. Maybe it feels like we are in the wilderness, maybe it feels like we are going without a map, but we are going somewhere.

So can we find hope? Can we rise up and accept the knowledge and the peace and the courage from God. King responded with the letter from that jail. He responded with a letter that promised to continue to march and walk and be the Christian God called him to be. Can we do the same? Can you say yes to the call of Christ with the assurance that God knows you where you are, God is with you, God loves you and cherishes you and God is leading you to a better place? Are you willing to take that chance with God? Can you trust and find hope with God? God is leading you out of the wilderness, out of the pain, out of the prison, out of the despair, and into the glory of the Lord's Kingdom.

AMEN