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Hemmed in

We are searched and besieged by God -- which is a fearful and wonderful thing, says Jeremy Troxler.

by [Jeremy Troxler](#)



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Editor's note: Faith & Leadership offers sermons that shed light on issues of Christian leadership. This sermon was preached Sept. 8, 2010, in Duke Divinity School's Goodson Chapel for a service to recognize and pray for student pastors.

Jeremy Troxler will preach during *Renewing the Church*, Duke Divinity School's 2013 Convocation & Pastors' School, Oct. 14-15. [Register online.](#)

[Psalm 139](#)

How wonderful -- how fearful -- it is to be known by God.

The psalmist says, "O LORD, you have searched me and known me."

"You have *searched* me" -- the word can have the sense of digging into, of drilling down. "Lord, you have *excavated* me." One person translates it, "Lord, you dig me." "You dig me, Lord."

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GO

God digs you. When no one else notices you -- when no one else has the time to bother -- God searches you. You are endlessly, fascinatingly interesting to God. God doesn't get tired of you. God searches you.

God knows you. This is the God whose eye is on the sparrow. This is the God who keeps your tears in a bottle. This is the God who took out the divine knitting needles and crocheted you together, stitch by stitch, in your mother's womb. This is the God who tallies the number of every hair on your head -- admittedly easier for some of us than others, but still ...

This is the God for whom there are no anonymous sheep, to whom nobody is a write-off, for whom no one is lost in the crowd. The personal God who loves the number one: one lost sheep, one missing coin, one sinner lost and found.

I visited a cemetery in the Channel Islands dedicated to the unknown dead of World War II, where the remains of soldiers have been interred. No one knows exactly who is buried there. No one knows what birth date or death date to inscribe on the headstones. No one knows the names. But One knows: the One who holds and beholds the unnoticed sacrifices and sufferings of our world. Across each gravestone are inscribed the words "Known by God." "Known by God."

How wonderful it is to be known by God.

The psalmist continues, "Lord, you know when I pull up a chair and when I stretch my legs. You know what's on my mind before my train of thought has even left the station. You search out my path like a hound dog sniffing out the trail ahead, and have fluffed the pillow before I've even laid down. You know all my maddening and endearing eccentricities and idiosyncrasies. I am an open book to you. You complete my sentences. You know me better than I know myself."

How wonderful it is to be known -- fully known -- by God.

While he was imprisoned for his resistance against the Nazis, the German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a poem called "Who Am I?" in which he meditates upon the difference between what others say about him during his time in prison and what he feels about himself inside.

Others see him as a cheerful tower of strength and faith amid hardship -- but on the inside he feels restless and yearning and sick, like a tiny bird in its cage, barely alive. "Who am I?" he asks. "This man or that other? / Am I then this man today and tomorrow another? / Am I both all at once? An imposter to others, / but to me little more than a whining, despicable weakling? / ... They mock me, these lonely questions of mine."

But Bonhoeffer concludes the poem with a type of Psalm 139: "Whoever I am, you know me, O God. You know I am yours."

How wonderful it is, when we do not even know ourselves, to be searched and known by God.

But how fearful a thing -- how fearful a thing to be searched and known by God.

I've been searched before. I go to board a plane. A big, frowning man in a uniform barks at me, "Drop your bag, sir." He unzips my suitcase, rummaging/ransacking through my most personal things. I'm not hiding anything, but still I'm almost afraid he'll find something. He grunts at me to "take your shoes off." I hop up and down in my socks, trying to remove my shoes while still standing and retaining some sense of dignity. I walk cautiously through a narrow gate and a beep goes off. The uniformed man slowly shakes his head. My belt is stripped off, shirttail pulled up out of my pants. I turn my pockets inside out. The beep goes off again. A woman with a badge pulls me aside, tells me, "Lean over and stretch out your arms, sir." She frisks me to the point where I think she gets to second base. She finds nothing and seems a little disappointed -- then grunts at me to move on.

I am disheveled, I am rattled, I feel a little violated -- I have been searched.

How fearful a thing to be searched and known by God.

I know that many people describe divinity school as a time of searching for God, but to me it more often felt like I was the one being searched, that God was searching me. It felt like trying to board that plane -- I was being excavated, dug out, frisked, shaken down -- and there was no way to escape.

The psalmist knows this. The psalmist marvels -- or is it laments? -- "You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me." The Hebrew word for "hem in" used here doesn't mean cuddle. It doesn't refer to a protective embrace, a great big bearhug, or to being wrapped in Bubble Wrap. The word for "hem in" is the word used when a city is laid under siege. "You besiege me, O God." "You hem me in. You besiege me. You entrap me. You encircle me. You beleaguer me, behind and before. You will not leave me alone."

This "hemming in" is not a hedge of protection; it's concertina wire for trespassers.

And here you begin to realize that Psalm 139 is more than just a hymn of praise to God's omniscience. It's perhaps also a kind of lament: the whole psalm a meditation on what it means to be both fearfully and wonderfully searched and known by this God.

The truth is, we do not want to be known through and through -- by anybody. We want to maintain strict control over who knows what about us and how much they know and when they know it. Isn't this why marriage is so hard? You get married, and suddenly you can't get away from this person! They know everything about you. Isn't that why people resent their parents? Because they know that sometimes their parents really do know them better than they know themselves, because they've watched us since we bounced on their knees. And we resent that.

Isn't that one reason being a pastor is so hard? The student pastors whom we honor today know this, that your life becomes so public when you are a pastor, because your role won't let you hide anymore, because the parsonage sometimes feels like a fishbowl where you are being watched. We don't want to be *that* known, that deeply all the time.

We don't want anyone, even God, to know everything about us, no matter how much we say otherwise. That's part of the reason we killed Jesus. We couldn't stand the suffocating intimacy of our salvation.

"Come and see a man," the Samaritan woman said, "who told me everything I have ever done." And not too many other people would take her up on the offer. Jesus would look at a person and would stare into their soul, his eyes digging into them, excavating the deepest recesses of their being, seeing them through and through. And we can only take so much of that.

Clarence Jordan said once that as long as God was an idea, an abstraction, a feeling, we were fine with God. Then Jesus showed up, in the flesh, looking at us with those excavating eyes. God was suddenly as real and tangible on earth as in heaven -- and we decided it wasn't a good place for God to be.

Jordan says that it felt like there was a preacher at the barbershop. It felt like there was a nun at the bar, or a monk at the bachelor party. So we said, "Jesus, we have to watch ourselves too much around you. We feel hemmed in around you. Now you go back home where you belong and be a good God, and maybe we'll see you of a Sunday morning."

Then we rolled the stone in front of the tomb.

It is a fearful thing to be known by God. We do not want to be known, but this searching, all-knowing God won't leave us alone. This God will not go away. We tried to kill him, and even that wouldn't work. Jesus just came back and said, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age," and you wonder sometimes with the psalmist whether that is a promise or a threat. Post-Easter, "Where can I go from your spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?"

The psalmist again: "If I top the clouds and mount up into the stratosphere -- You. If I roll out a sleeping bag down in the lowest basement of hell -- You. If I catch a pre-dawn flight over the farthest ocean -- You."

This is the height, breadth, depth of the love of Christ. "Even there your right hand holds me by the scruff of the neck. Even the darkness, even my darkness is not dark to you, O God": I pull down the shade, I turn out the lights, I hide under the bed or beneath the shade of my self-deception -- and I might as well be in a spotlight. You, again.

I'm sitting on my porch, holding my beautiful baby daughter, beholding a gorgeous, sunny, 80-degree Labor Day weekend day with family all around. And I find myself sitting there -- with so many other things I could be thinking about -- I find myself sitting there and thinking about all the children in my

neighborhood from broken homes that don't have good families, that I could invite over to join us for our cookout, and I'm meditating on the Gospel from last Sunday, looking at my baby daughter and wondering how Jesus could ever tell me to hate the most precious gift he ever gave me. Where can I flee from your presence, O God? Will you not even leave me the front porch on a holiday weekend?

You, again. There is no escape from this God. We've said before that when the psalmist writes, "You hem me in, O God," the psalmist means, "You besiege me; you surround me."

During the Civil War, Union forces under Gen. Ulysses S. Grant laid siege to the Confederate Fort Donelson in Tennessee. The Union army surrounded the fort on every side. The Confederate defenders tried to break out but soon realized that it was futile, that all was lost; there was no escape. So they sent a messenger to Grant to sue for peace, to try to negotiate chivalrous or favorable terms of surrender. But Grant would have none of it. His reply was a terse note: "No terms, but unconditional and immediate surrender, can be accepted. I propose to move immediately upon your works. I am, sir, very respectfully, your obedient servant."

Jesus once told a parable about the sticker shock of following him that compared discipleship to a decision about whether to go to war or sue for peace. And yet the God of Psalm 139 has laid us under siege, accepts no terms but unconditional and immediate surrender, and proposes to move immediately upon our works.

How fearful a thing to be searched and known by this God.

And yet how wonderful, how wonderful. How wonderful to know that the battle is over. No more need to hide: all is accepted. You will be searched -- but nothing will be found within you that is not already known and embraced. You discover that mercy's honest captive is more free than the lying fugitive. You find that we feared to give up everything, only to have been given more than everything.

The surrender to the siege is a sweet one. For the God of unconditional surrender is the God of unconditional love. The God who won't let us escape is also the God who fearfully and wonderfully made us in the first place. Our frame was not hidden from this God when we were being formed in secret, intricately woven in the depths of mystery. God's eyes beheld our unformed substance -- and in God's book were written all the days that were formed for us, when none of them yet existed.

It is a wonderful thing to be searched, to be known, to be besieged by this God.

C.S. Lewis once described his conversion in terms of a long siege resulting in a blessed surrender. "You must picture me alone in that room ...," he wrote, "night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. ... I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England."

And yet Lewis goes on to offer thanks for the God of Psalm 139 when he says, "I did not then see what is now the most shining and obvious thing: the Divine humility which will accept a convert even on such terms. The Prodigal Son at least walked home on his own feet. But who can duly adore that Love which will open the high gates to a prodigal who is brought in kicking, struggling, resentful, and darting his eyes in every direction for a chance of escape? The words *compelle intrare* [in the parable], 'compel them to come in,' have been so abused by wicked men that we shudder at them; but, properly understood, they plumb the depth of the Divine mercy. *The hardness of God is kinder than the softness of men, and [God's] compulsion is our liberation.*"

O Lord, you have searched us and known us: We are fearfully and wonderfully made and known.

Where can we go from your spirit?

Where can we flee from your presence?

Nowhere. Thank you, God.

Search us, then, and know our hearts.

Test us and know our thoughts.

See if there is any wicked way in us,

and lead us in the way everlasting.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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