

BETTER THAN YOU KNOW YOURSELF

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Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18

Don't raise your hand, but how many of you have a Facebook account? Probably, most of you. You use Facebook to keep up with friends and grandchildren, to see photos of little league games and ballet recitals, to get news about the upcoming reunion, to be reminded of birthdays. Maybe you like to play games or read the news feed.

I do have a Facebook account, but I don't use it. I had to create the account (reluctantly) for a class that I took a couple of years back. I have just one friend. It's the teacher of that class. I haven't even friended my wife. One day, I imagine the powers-that-be will audit my account and see that I have done nothing and erase the account and cast me into the outer darkness.

Why don't I do Facebook? Doesn't everyone? There are several reasons. One is time. I consistently hear about how much time people say they spend goofing around on Facebook. I already have plenty of ways to waste time. I don't need any more. Another reason is the way that Facebook distorts our lives. Studies have shown¹ that using Facebook has a detrimental effect on peoples' overall well-being. It decreases their happiness and increases feelings of envy when they see how wonderful other people's lives appear to be by what they've posted. I could be standing on the bow of a yacht in the Mediterranean nibbling caviar and then look at Facebook and see a post from a guy I knew in college showing him grilling burgers at the lake with his buddies and I would think, "his life is so much better than mine."

The primary reason that I stay away from Facebook has to do with privacy. Not privacy from other people, but privacy from Facebook itself. The thing we have to remember is that Facebook is a business. You may not pay anything to them directly—so it seems like a free service—but Facebook earns the bulk of its money from advertising. Facebook places ads on the pages that you look at. The more time you spend on Facebook, the more ads you see, the more money they make. And it seems to be working. In 2015, Facebook reported revenue of \$18 billion. That number will grow in 2016. Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook, is estimated to be worth \$56 billion. According to Forbes magazine, he is the fifth wealthiest person in the world.²

¹ <https://www.newyorker.com/tech/elements/how-facebook-makes-us-unhappy>

² <https://www.forbes.com/billionaires/list/>

So how does Facebook entice you to mouse around for hour after hour? They do so by attempting to connect you with other people and by constantly expanding your list of friends by suggesting people you might know. Where does Facebook get the names of these people you might know? First of all, they get them from your address book and emails. You can deny Facebook the permission to do this but it is difficult. Facebook is very sneaky with buttons that give them permission to do things. If you have the Facebook app in your phone, then it will vacuum up all the information that it finds there—contacts, numbers, call history, emails, messages, and more.

The other thing Facebook does—and they don't like to talk about this—is to create what are known as 'shadow profiles.' Your regular profile is the information that you post about yourself—your name, address, employer, spouse or significant other, you're where you went to school, and more. This is the stuff you want the world to see. Facebook creates a secret, secondary profile of information that they have collected about you from outside sources and other users. If your name is in someone else's address book then Facebook links them to you. Your phone number in their phone links them to you. These people—the people with connections to you—become part of your shadow profile. Facebook uses this profile to find people you might know.

So, what's the big deal about this? It's just Facebook. Imagine that you are a psychiatrist and suddenly all of your clients (who would rather be anonymous) are grouped together in Facebook because of their connection to you. Or you are a journalist working on a dangerous story and Facebook links you to one of your sources. This week, for example, I checked my account and was surprised to see in my person you may know list was a surgeon that I had seen just once as a referral. That person is not in my address book, but he has been linked to me. That may or may not be information that I want people to have.

There are lots of other ways that Facebook can link people—through photographs, location, and more. I'm not saying that you should get rid of Facebook, but just be careful.

Our reading today is Psalm 139. Have you figured out where I'm going? If not maybe this joke will help. What is the difference between God and Facebook? One is an all-powerful presence with knowledge of everything, and the other is God.

Psalm 139 is a beautiful soliloquy to God about how well God knows us. It begins, *O Lord, you have searched me and known me.* The word Lord is actually Yahweh, the personal name of God. The song addresses God personally. *You searched me out, you found me, you know me, you know my activities, you know when I sit down and when I stand. You know what I am thinking. You know all that I do. You know where I go and where I sleep. Before I speak, you know what I'm going to say. You are all around me. You've got me fenced-in.* While I may be

questioning Facebook's privacy policies, the psalmist rejoices that God knows him so completely. *You know all about me and I find that to be wonderful. I cannot fathom all that you know about me.*

We don't know why the psalmist wrote this psalm. It certainly stands as a testament to God's power. One contemporary scholar has an interesting take on this psalm. He has proposed that the psalm was written by a priest who may have been wrongly accused of a transgression against God. In his defense, the priest calls out to God saying, "You know me better than I know myself. You know I did not do these things of which I have been accused."

The psalmist also recounts how God created him. *You formed my inner parts. You knit me together in my mother's womb. I am wonderfully made. Before I was born, I was a mass of unformed substance. You looked upon me and suddenly all the days of my life were written out in your great book. You are more than I can measure. To the end of my life, I am with you.*

Whether the writer was accused of a transgression or not, this psalm has stood for generations as a celebration of God's love for us.

Facebook is not the only human entity that wants our personal information. Politicians want to know our voting habits, insurance companies would love to have access to our DNA, credit companies want our financial history. Everybody it seems has an ulterior motive, a way to profit from us. Except God. God made us and loves us. God desires nothing but a relationship with us.

Martin Buber, an early twentieth-century Jewish philosopher offers this description of the relationship we have with God. In his words we find a reflection of Psalm 139.

Where I wander – You!
Where I ponder – You!
Only You, You again, always You!
You! You! You!
When I am gladdened – You!
When I am saddened – You!
Only You, You again, always You!
You! You! You!
Sky is You, Earth is You!
You above! You below!
In every trend, at every end,
Only You, You again, always You!
You! You! You!³

³ Tales of the Hasadim by Martin Buber

In composing Psalm 139, the psalmist wasn't concerned with the presence of big data in his life. That didn't exist. The psalmist was aware that God knew everything about him, his thoughts, his movements, his words. Instead of being disturbed or frightened, the psalmist is reassured by this fact. It was the source of ultimate comfort to know that God—Yahweh, the Creator—knows us intimately, better than we know ourselves. Even in death, God is with us. God does not use this knowledge to profit off of us, to use us, to persuade us how to vote, or influence what we buy. No, it is the experience of the psalmist that God simply knows us and loves us. It is possible, when we allow it, to feel the warmth of God's love flowing over us. That is an embrace like no other. When we are lost or broken or feel forgotten, the psalm reminds us of God's willingness to be with us and hold us close. There is nothing in life that can surpass that. For this we can be truly thankful. Amen.