

Is the omniscience of God a comforting thing or a terrifying thing?

Maybe some of you remember that word from your confirmation days. *Omniscience* is the fancy word for the truth that John states so matter-of-factly in our lesson for today. **He [God] knows everything.**

In many places the Bible very clearly teaches that God is omniscient. Right now, at this moment, he knows everything – everything that has ever happened in the history of this world, everything that is happening at this moment, and everything that will happen in the future.

He knows how many fish are in the sea, how many birds are in the air, how many hairs are on your head.

He knows and remembers where you were born, where you've lived. He knows what you are going to do today, and where you'll live tomorrow and when you will die.

God knows everything. The question I have for you today is this: Is the omniscience of God comforting or terrifying? Is the fact that God knows everything good news or bad news?

Would you like to know the Bible's answer to that question?

Here it is, are you ready? Is the omniscience of God comforting or terrifying?... According to the Bible, it depends...

You see, if you search the Bible to answer that question you will find passages that at first glance seem to contradict each other. You will find passages that talk about the omniscience of God as a comfort. But you will also find passages that talk about the omniscience of God as a terrifying warning.

Far from being a contradiction though, the Bible's answer to this question is a resounding: it depends... depends on what? Well, it depends on you and your heart...

Let me show you what I mean. I'm going to read you a couple passages, and as I read them I want you to ask yourself: Is this good news or bad news? Does this comfort me or terrify me?

Ready? Here we go...

Psalm 139:1-4 **O LORD, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD.**

Good news or bad news? God has searched you and he knows you better than you know the back of your hand. God knows where you've been and what you've done. He knows every thought that has flitted through your mind. He knows every word you've ever said and every word you are going to say before you even say them.

Good news or bad news? Does that comfort you or terrify you?

Well it depends on what God finds when he searches you, right? It depends on what you've been thinking and saying and doing.

Here's another passage:

Hebrews 4:13 **Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.**

Good news or bad news? Nothing you have done or will do is hidden from the sight God – the God who is described as **“the one to whom we must give account.”**

The answer to that question is, “It depends.” Depends on you and how you've been doing at following Jesus' directives in the Gospel of John we heard today.

In our Gospel, Jesus says he is the vine and we are the branches and that means two things: 1) it means we need to remain connected to Jesus because just like a branch cannot survive if it is separated from the plant, our faith cannot survive without staying connected to Jesus, his life, his word, his teaching. 2) it means we need to bear fruit. If we claim to be connected to Jesus but don't let Jesus change the way we live, don't let Jesus guide our thoughts, words, and actions so they become fruits of love for God and our neighbor, then we are an unproductive branch, and what does Jesus say the Father does with withered, unproductive branches? He throws them in the fire.

So, is the omniscience of God meant to comfort or terrify? One way to answer that question is to ask yourself this question: Are you taking your beliefs and your behavior seriously?

Is staying connected to the vine, learning more about Jesus and from Jesus the single driving motivator of your life? Is going to worship every single weekend not even a question because worshiping Jesus is the most important thing in your life, so of course you are going to church this weekend, and next weekend, and the weekend after that, and every weekend until you go to heaven because everything takes a back seat to staying connected the Vine?

Is reading the words of your God in the Bible as important to every single day as drinking water, eating food, or breathing? Because you know that just like your body needs to be fed on a daily basis, just like a branch needs the vine every minute of every day, just as critically, no *more* critically, your faith needs to be fed on a daily basis by Jesus' words in the Bible.

Do you obsess not only about staying connected to Jesus, but also about producing fruit? Do you obsess about conforming every single aspect of your life to how Jesus would have you live?

Do you love God more than anything? Do you love God's people (the people around you) more than you love yourself?

If the answer to those questions is no, or even just sometimes, then I think your consciences already know the answer to our big question today.

God in his Bible says to spiritually lazy, imperfect people: I know everything – a clear and frankly terrifying warning to those whose connection to the vine is less than perfect and whose fruits are lacking.

And that uncomfortable truth is a prominent message in the letter of 1 John. One of the main reasons John wrote this letter was because some Christians were getting spiritually lazy. They were claiming they loved Jesus but their actions were speaking louder than their words. They were claiming to cling to Jesus while also clinging to the pet sins of their past. They said they loved Jesus but they were not putting their money where their mouth was.

That is why John says to them: **Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.**

It is one thing to say "I love Jesus," but God knows everything. He knows if you are blowing smoke. He knows every single instance when, though you claim to love him, your behavior was far from loving.

So, is the omniscience of God comforting or terrifying?

Well, one way to answer that question is: *if* my omniscient God's treatment of me is going to be based off of my track record of loving not just with words or speech but with actions and in truth; *if* the only way I can have a peace-filled heart is by obeying his commands and doing what pleases him, then the answer to our big question today seems clear.

It doesn't seem like there is room for any seeming contradiction at all. How could anyone find comfort in the fact that God knows everything?

And yet look again at how John talks about the omniscience of God today. Immediately after those sobering words about putting our money where our mouths are John says: **This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence: If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts and he knows everything.**

How could God's omniscience be comforting? I mean I know myself. I know my thoughts and my words and my actions, and God knows them even better than I. How could it ever be comforting to know that God knows everything?

Here's the Bible's crazy answer:

If you know that God knows and are concerned; if you hear the warning about having to give account to the one who sees everything and you care, and it scares you; if you look at your heart and head and knowing that God sees what you see, if that worries you, then God has a very different message for you – a message about his omniscience that is not meant to terrify or worry you, but to comfort you. If you have a heart that is scared and nervous and disappointed when you think about God watching then the crazy message of the Bible is: don't be afraid.

Because you see, that concern, that fear, that worry is what the Bible calls repentance – sorrow over your sins, and disappointment and fear because you know God sees your sins. And God's message for repentant sinners in the Bible is clear: don't be afraid.

The only time the omniscience of God should completely terrify you is if you think about it and you *don't* care. If you don't care about your sins, then our omniscient God has a stern word of warning.

When it comes to our big question today, the "it depends" of the Bible is not "it depends on if you are a perfect person" because there are no perfect people. The "it depends" of the Bible is "it depends on if you are repentant." Do you care that you have failed your God? Are you sorry for your sins.

When the answer to those questions is no, then the omniscience of God should terrify you.

If the answer is yes, then the omniscience of should comfort you.

There is a reason that Luther's first Thesis from his famous 95 was: **When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said "Repent," he intended that the entire life of believers should be repentance.**

Repentant hearts, hearts that know that God sees and care, are hearts that our Lord Jesus would comfort.

But that still leaves the question: how is the omniscience of God comforting to repentant hearts?

Here is the point John beautifully makes to weak, inconsistent, sinful but repentant believers: **when your heart condemns you;** when your heart says that God couldn't possibly love you because of what you've done; when your heart says you don't belong in the presence of an all-knowing God; God says, "Your heart may tell you that you deserve condemnation, but I don't condemn you. Your heart may tell you that you don't deserve my love, but I love you. Your heart may tell you that you don't deserve to be in my presence but I say as my dearly loved sons and daughters I love having you around. And I'm greater than your heart. You can trust me because I'm smarter than you. I know everything, and if I, who know everything say you are not condemned and you are loved and you belong than I am right and your heart is wrong."

Do you see how incredibly comforting these words are for guilty consciences and condemned hearts?

When you feel guilty, unloved, unwelcome, unworthy, God says, "Your feelings, your heart is wrong. I am right. You are forgiven. You are loved. You belong. You are my sons and daughters. And you can trust me because I know everything!"

The truth is that if my omniscient God's treatment of me is based off my track record of loving not just with words or speech but with actions and in truth then his omniscience inspires nothing but fear. BUT (and that "but" is the beautiful part of Christianity, isn't it?), but our sins are no longer the only things our omniscient God sees when he searches us.

Yes, God knows your flaws, your failures, your imperfections.

But do you know what else he knows?

He knows how his Son Jesus was born of the virgin Mary and proceeded to do for you what you didn't do, what you and I, sinners, couldn't do. He loved his God and God's people not just with words or speech but with actions and truth.

God knows your flaws, but he also knows Jesus' flawlessness.

Yes, the God whom we must give account knows everything.

But do you know what else he knows?

He knows his Son died on a cross. He remembers abandoning his Son so that he wouldn't have to abandon you. He remembers his Son's cry of, "It is finished!" as he died to settle the account between sinners and God once and for all.

God knows how much we owe him, he also knows that Jesus paid that price.

Yes, our God knows our sins, but do you know what else he knows?

He knows you were baptized. He remembers that day when you, or someone who loved you brought you, a sinner, to water because they knew God's promise in the Bible that if you take a sinner and apply water in name of our God sinners can be saved, failure can be forgiven – that through the waters of baptism the very Spirit of God can be placed in the heart of sinful people so that when our all-knowing God looks at us he sees Spirit-filled, forgiven sinners.

And this is how God's omniscience can set our hearts at rest in his presence.

When God's omniscience convicts your heart and reminds you of how guilty you are. When your heart condemns you, remember that your heart does not get the last word. God does. And he knows everything. He knows that he loves you because of Jesus. So, repentant sinners, find comfort in your omniscient God.

Amen.