

A Faith Journey based on Psalm 139

What can I tell you about my life story in 30 minutes or less? And more than that, what is it about my life that you might find interesting—let alone inspirational? As I thought about what to say today, some verses from Psalm 139 came to mind. So I opened the Scripture and began reading, and realized the almost six decades of my life fit rather nicely within these verses! I'd like to read it to you now, and then tell you a bit about myself:

PS 139:1 O LORD, you have searched me and you know me.

PS 139:2 You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar.

PS 139:3 You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways.

PS 139:4 Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD.

PS 139:5 You hem me in--behind and before; you have laid your hand upon me.

PS 139:6 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain.

PS 139:7 Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?

PS 139:8 If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

PS 139:9 If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea,

PS 139:10 even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.

PS 139:11 If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,"

PS 139:12 even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.

PS 139:13 For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb.

PS 139:14 I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.

PS 139:15 My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth,

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PS 139:16 your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.

PS 139:17 How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!

PS 139:18 Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand. When I awake, I am still with you. . . .

PS 139:23 Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts.

PS 139:24 See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

My parents, Harold and Madeline Miller, were Pennsylvania Dutch. My father was one of 12 children and was raised Mennonite. My mom was the second oldest of 5 girls; she was raised Lutheran. They came to faith as young adults, in their 20s and 30s, at 10th Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, under the teaching of Dr. Donald Grey Barnhouse.

**For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. . . .
your eyes saw my unformed body. . . before one of them came to be.**

Mom and Dad moved to West Palm Beach, Florida when I was 6 months old. I am one of 5 children, the 4th girl, and my brother is #5. My earliest memories include hearing about Dr. Barnhouse, who was in my mind equivalent to Moses (I think in my parent's minds too!) My parents loved God deeply and wanted their children to love him too. When I was 4 years old my mom helped me to memorize Psalm 23. I also remember sitting on my dad's lap while he drove his van; he worked the pedals and gears, while I steered. What fun! He loved singing old hymns too at the top of his lungs as we drove along. My parents taught me to love God, and I did with all my heart!

Then something went terribly wrong. Mental illness took hold of my father. For the next 5 years my mother and older sisters endured terrible mental and physical abuse. It took me well into my adulthood to realize that even though I hadn't experienced the same abuse as my mom or older siblings, just living in that environment was abusive and affected me profoundly. My mom worked fulltime, and her absence in my life affected me greatly. I was a very lonely child. When I was in 2nd grade I vividly recall going to school after one of my father's outbursts and standing in the bathroom, looking in the mirror crying and saying, "Nobody loves me, except Jesus."

My mom divorced my dad when I was 11 years old. It was a devastating relief. I saw him a handful of times after that; he died in 1982.

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"Even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast."

The summer before going into 7th grade, I was diagnosed with Idiopathic Scoliosis, a curved spine.

**My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place.
When I was woven together in the depths of the earth,**

I had to wear a clunky, metal body brace with leather straps that forced my rib cages to align. It was painful and uncomfortable, and made me "stand out," when all you want to do at that age is "fit in." I suppose the absence of my earthly father made it difficult for me to believe that my Heavenly Father loved me. I desperately wanted to be loved and accepted. I tried to fit in with my peers, which means for the next several years I took paths that led me far away from God. I never openly denied him, but I tried avoiding him.

Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me.

But God didn't give up on me! Many times in this darkness, God's Spirit reminded me I was going the wrong way. Yet I still resisted him, and chose my own path. I decided that when I was older I'd get serious about my "relationship" with God.

Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I make my bed in the depths, you are there . . . your right hand will hold me fast.

In the middle of 10th grade my body brace came off and I was grateful that phase was finally over! I could now be viewed as "normal," and not judged for my outward appearance. I completed high school and was in my 2nd year of college, excelling in my major of "Fine Art and partying hardy." Around that time I started having heart pains and trouble breathing. The doctors told me that my back was getting worse. My spine was literally crushing my internal organs. Without surgery, I would die within 5 years. And there was a possibility that I could die in surgery. I was 20 years old at the time.

**All the days ordained for me were written in your book
before one of them came to be.**

I remember driving home from Miami that day with my mom. She was driving. I was in shock. Looking out the window, I knew God had allowed this. It was as if God were saying, "You might not get older. It's time to turn back to me." So I set my heart to follow Jesus as Lord, as best I knew how, and with his help I did. It took me many years to realize that I wasn't being punished by God for having lived the way I had lived. However, I do think God used that circumstance as a correction, as any loving father would do for his child!

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I was dating a young man at the time, not Bob. We had planned to marry. I spent 10 days in halo traction before my surgery, and grew 1-1/2". In surgery, they stretched out my spine by another 1-1/4". It was brutal. Then they put me in a full body cast made of heavy plaster and sent me home. For the next 9 months, I could only stand or lie down; no sitting was allowed. Two months into my recovery, my boyfriend left me. I was devastated. My mom wanted to kill him! Many of my "friends" left me too. They didn't want anything to do with this "new me," who now wanted to follow Jesus.

You hem me in--behind and before; you have laid your hand upon me.

At the time, none of my life to that point made sense, the brokenness of my home, the deformity of my body, the shame of my rebellion, the possibility of dying, and the loss of who I thought was the "love of my life." But God's plan was coming together. Much like a baby that is formed in the womb, those 9 months of recovery, which allowed me plenty of time to study Scripture and pray, were preparing me for my "new birth."

God allowed these hardships in my life to begin forging my personality. I had learned firsthand the unfairness of being judged for how I looked on the outside, learning compassion for those who are "different." I learned kindness and acceptance towards those who are hurting and lonely. I appreciated the mercy of God extended towards me, and wanted to share God's love with others. Yes, God was conforming me into the image of his Son. But there was a lot of work to do!

**I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful, I know that full well.**

When I got out of my body cast, I switched my major to Psychology and Religion at Palm Beach Atlantic University. I graduated with honors in 1981. I was also involved at First Baptist Church in West Palm Beach, and helped to form the College and Young Adult group. It was there that I met *Robert Dana Keith*, "Bob," the younger brother of the Music Minister at the time. The day I shook Bob's hand, a thought crossed my mind that I would know him for a long time! Five months later, in April of 1982 we were married! Over the next 8 years, we would have three children, Jared, Jacob, and Dana. I was a stay-at-home mom. Bob and I wanted to give our children what we didn't have growing up, and that meant time spent with their parents!

I praise you . . . your works are wonderful, I know that full well.

Having children opened my mind to a world of creative ideas. I began developing games and activities to teach our kids the alphabet, numbers, shapes, and spiritual lessons. God was using my desire to be home with my children, and all that I had learned in school—art,

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psychology, and my faith—and packaged it in my mind in such a way as to provide an avenue of learning for my children, and a creative outlet for me! I could never have planned that! And miraculously, one of those games was actually licensed for a number of years by a sporting goods company!

During those early years of marriage and raising children, Bob had debilitating health problems from a broken neck that had paralyzed him for an entire year (that was before we met). Bob lived in constant pain. As a result, he had many corrective neck surgeries over the years and became addicted to pain killers. This put a huge strain on our marriage and family life. Yet, through God's help, Bob continued working through the pain. He set an example to our children of the importance of hard work and tenacity.

In 1992, we decided to visit First Presbyterian Church in NPB, and about two years later we joined the church. It was there that I was pulled into the children's ministry program. I had many ideas of how to make learning the Bible fun and engaging. I began writing my ideas down and taught in the children's Wednesday night program.

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.

In 1994, the internet was just getting started. I learned how to design a one-page website, and posted pictures of some Chrismon Snowflakes I had created. (I had learned about Chrismons, "Christ-monograms," at First Presbyterian.)

Before long that one page website grew, and grew, and grew, and other Christian teachers began sending me their ideas to share on the website. The site now holds around 2000 pages of free and pay-for-use Children's Ministry resources. About half the content I have created, with the other ideas coming from people who want to share their ideas with other teachers.

Bob and I had the great privilege of tag-teaming to care for our kids, taking them to school, church, choir, music lessons, baseball, soccer, theater, school performances, field trips, recitals, birthday parties, holidays, vacations—we were always there to cheer them on. Raising our children was like a whirlwind. It seemed like it would never end—and then it did! It was the joy of our lives. Even though we tried desperately to be the best parents, we made many mistakes—of course not the ones our parents made! We came up with our own! I suppose the greatest regret of raising my children is that I don't get a "do-over." We've all been given one life to live. How important it is not to waste it! But, if God can use the brokenness of my childhood and turn it to good, I trust he will do the same with the mistakes we made with our children, who now have become responsible, mature adults who we love and respect. My daughter recently said, "Mom, if you were a perfect parent, we wouldn't have needed our Perfect Heavenly Father." (She's so wise!)

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How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!

My mom was an integral part of helping to raise our children. All the times I missed having her involved with me as a child, because she had to work to support our family, she put in double time to help me raise our kids. She was a very talented hairdresser, and owned her own beauty shop. She was the most contented person I have ever known. And the only explanation for this was her deep faith in God. She believed what Jesus said, **"I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. Here on earth you *will* have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world."** Mom worked until she was 84, and then her health began to fail. The only reason she ever slowed down was that her customers were dying on her! We insisted she move in with us. Shortly after, she had a heart attack. She had double bypass surgery, but was never the same afterwards. It was at this time, when Bob's health was at a very low point, with two teenagers still living at home, that I was diagnosed with breast cancer. It wasn't advanced, yet the stress of those years had taken a toll. I also began having panic attacks, so severe were they in the beginning, that for 2 weeks I laid in bed in a fetal position. It was terrible. Everything scared me!

Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts.

For several years, I took medication and went to counseling, and read many books to overcome my anxiety. Slowly it began to dissipate, but would rear its ugly head from time to time. I eventually got off the medication and tried exercising to relieve it naturally. That helped too, but not entirely. It helped to discover that many people struggle with this disorder, including my pastor! Honestly, I felt like a failure in my Christian walk. That internal voice often repeated, "If you trusted God more, you wouldn't have this problem." I know that's a lie, yet it nagged at my soul. It was a dark place.

**Even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day,
for darkness is as light to you.**

Over the next several years, we watched my mom, an intelligent, creative, and beautiful lover of God, descend into dementia—it was heartbreaking. The last year of her life, I found myself begging God to take her home. She was ready to die. Her faith was strong. And even though she often forgot who I was, she never forgot who Jesus was. In fact, 5 weeks before she died and went into hospice care within our home, she could still recite long passages of Scripture, such as John 1:1-17 or Psalm 23. It was remarkable.

Then on October 12, 2013, a date that has changed our family forever, Bob fainted and fell, and hit his head, suffering a traumatic brain injury. The doctors didn't expect him to live. They said that if he did live, he would probably never walk, talk, or understand anything ever again. With that kind of prognosis, I don't know why I told the doctors to save him, but I did.

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Twelve days later, on the 24th of October, at 12:12 pm, my precious mother drew her last earthly breath to breathe in Heaven's air!

Bob was in ICU in a coma for over 5 weeks, and then spent 6 months in 5 different hospitals. While he was in a coma, we would talk to him, pray with him, sing to him, and read to him. On one of those occasions our son, Jacob, said, "Dad you've got to wake up. You have to walk Dana down the aisle when she gets married." (She wasn't even engaged.) Everyone in the room burst into tears. It was unthinkable!

I didn't know it was possible to feel grief as deeply as I did. The pit of despair and hopelessness was encompassing. I couldn't eat or sleep. My prayers became one-word prayers, "Jesus!" I felt abandoned by God. My faith was being tried like never before. What did I believe? Where's God? Why has he allowed this? How could I feel so lost? All the lessons I'd written on faith seemed to mock me. But God sent his children to our aid—to be Jesus with skin on. I am forever grateful to my family, our church family, and the many friends who lifted us up in prayer, delivered food, sent cards, showed up at the hospitals, helped with our expenses, on and on our cup overflowed with help from the Body of Christ. God even sent strangers to Bob's hospital room who encouraged me. They'd say, "Don't give up. He will make it. God will heal him." Sometimes I wonder if some of them were angels!

Bob has made a recovery that none of the doctors expected. He still has a long way to go, and does have trouble understanding and speaking, but he continues to improve incrementally. We still need lots of prayer!

God in his mercy allowed Bob to live. We are grateful as a family to have been given more time to enjoy one another. And miraculously, I do see good coming out of this tragedy.

I've read the book of Philippians many, many times---even studying it for a semester at university. Recently this verse stood out in a way I've never noticed; proving that God's Word truly is living and active, and meets us in the circumstances of our lives. I know so many people who are suffering. And as I've tried to make sense of my husband's and my years of suffering, this verse spoke to me in a profound way: ***For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him . . .*** Philippians 1:29 (NIV).

Granted? A gift of suffering? Many of us ask God to help us to be patient, to give us wisdom, or to strengthen our faith. But when God uses the circumstances of our lives to teach us these lessons, we may feel like he's abandoned us, or he's punishing us. The reality is, this *is* how God teaches us, he even uses our mistakes—much like natural parents do with their children.

We ask God to make us Christ-like, who suffered and died on a cross, but when we experience suffering, we ask, "Why me?"

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Our daughter just got married to a Godly young man. It was a glorious and joyful day! Bob was able to walk her down the aisle (more like she walked him down the aisle). There wasn't a dry eye in the Sanctuary!

Our nest is finally empty. It is strange living in our home without kids. It can be lonely. Particularly since conversation is difficult with Bob. I don't know what the future holds, or the paths God has yet to take us down—who does? But I trust that God will continue leading us!

And on the day that I breathe my last, and stand before God, my desire is to hear him say, "Well done, good, and faithful servant."

If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. . . . O LORD, you have searched me and you know me. You are familiar with all my ways. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting. Amen.