Heart Health Series:
Search My Heart (Psalm 139:23-24)

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These sermon study notes are designed to be a tool used after listening to the sermon. This resource is a guide to help deepen understanding regarding the Scriptures and ideas presented in the sermon. Those who use these study notes are encouraged to look up, read through, and think about Scripture references in this guide. There is more information in these notes than what is presented in the sermon. These study notes are designed to be used as an independent study tool to help the formation of Biblical convictions, character, and conduct.

Search My Heart

I. Introduction

A. Illustration: An Introvert with Strangers

1. As an introvert, I feel uncomfortable and sometimes struggle in situations where I meet new people (or those I don't know well and am unfamiliar with) and am required to interact with them in conversation. The most dreaded and draining type of situations are the ones in which I have to make casual small talk in a room full of strangers.
2. My nervousness and discomfort can (and does) lead to social awkwardness. Even when I try my best to be friendly, inviting, and social, I can still experience awkward interactions with others. This personality weakness leaves me feeling vulnerable when I'm around new or unfamiliar people. I know that I don't do well or thrive in these types of environments. While I get out of my comfort zone and try to be as outgoing as I can, I have mixed results, at best. I'm not able to, with consistency, make new people feel at ease because I'm not at ease in those types of situations.
3. These dynamics have led others to criticize the way I try to interact with others and even speak negatively about me. It is common for others to take our mistakes, failures, or moral wrongs and use them as weapons against us. We associate being unsafe with being vulnerable. This association can become a spiritual problem.

B. Typically, when we feel vulnerable, we also tend to feel unsafe. Why? Because we know that other people, with alarming regularity, take advantage of our vulnerability to hurt or use us. Over time and through experience, we learn that it is not safe to be vulnerable. While this isn't true with everyone, it is true with those who misuse our vulnerability. When this happens, we begin to hide our vulnerabilities and try to act confidently, even when we feel vulnerable. This is why we learn to hide our weaknesses and faults as we get older. Being vulnerable is not the problem; being mistreated in our vulnerability is.

C. Unfortunately, we assume that God will treat us the way other people do. When we feel vulnerable with God, we also assume we are unsafe. We view being vulnerable with God as being unsafe with God. Tragically, this is a common mistake. The good news is that we can be vulnerable with God because He will never use our vulnerability to hurt us. God uses our vulnerability to help us because He is morally good. With God, we can learn to be vulnerable in a healthy way that we can benefit from. Rather than hiding from God, we can be open with Him. David learned this valuable lesson, which is why he was able to confidently pray his next prayer in pursuit of the heart of God.

D. In Psalm 139:23-24 we will have the opportunity to learn about some of the specific ways God creates a clean heart within a person. David prays for the Spirit of God to perform specific actions so that he can be transformed to be the person he desires to be. David is open to and provides a warm welcome for the influence of God in his life.

II. Search Me to Know Who I Am

A. After a significant moral failure, David recognized his need for God to create a clean heart in David. David reached out to God and asked for God's help—for God's Spirit to work in David to make him a good person at his deepest and most foundational level. This is the prayer captured in Psalm 51:10. Now, David is going to pray for God to do specific actions in him to create that clean heart. We will see how a person after God's own heart prays for God to work in them so they can be shaped to become the person they desire to be.

B. In Psalm 139, we get a master's level class about how to meditate—think reflectively—about God.[1] If we want to learn how to think well about God, David gives us an excellent example. This psalm is a written meditation of David thinking about the nature of God and the impact God has on David's life. David's understanding of who God is changed how David lives and relates to God. David's deep understanding of God is apparent throughout this psalm. As David is contemplating God and God's role in David's life, David naturally turns to prayer and asks God to work in David in specific ways.

C. Here is David's prayer related to God creating a clean heart:

> [23] Search me, God, and know my heart; (Ps. 139:23)

D. David asks God to consider him in detail to know who David really is ("Search me, God", v. 23).[2] David wants God to assess and evaluate who he is as a person—his nature and lifestyle. This transparency and openness toward God results in an accurate knowledge of everything that is true about David ("and know my heart", v. 23). Unlike some human opinions, God's perspective and knowledge about us is based on every fact and all the information that pertains to who we are.[3] God has a mental awareness of all knowledge (called omniscience); he knows all there is to know about us with perfect accuracy. God doesn't believe anything about us that is not true, and He is aware of everything that is true—nothing is missing. In short, God knows us better than anyone else, and we are totally and completely seen and understood. Earlier in this Psalm, David expresses amazement at how much God knows about him.

E. The object of the search is to know and improve the heart of the person praying this prayer, including their whole spiritual orientation—thoughts ("thoughts", v. 23), emotions ("anxious", v. 23), and motives ("any hurtful way in me", v. 24).[4] God's searching of us includes everything that happens privately within us and everything that happens publicly outside of us. God knows it all—every single aspect of who we are and what we do.

F. David describes the depth and detail of God's knowledge of him throughout the rest of this Psalm, including this robust description:

> [1] Lord, You have searched me and known *me.* [2] You know when I sit down and when I get up; You understand my thought from far away. [3] You scrutinize my path and my

[1] See the excellent resource David W. Saxton, *God's Battle Plan for the Mind: The Puritan Practice of Biblical Meditation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2015).
[2] Logos 10 Bible Study Software Exegetical Guide on Psalm 139: 23 "Search"
[3] Logos 10 Bible Study Software Exegetical Guide on Psalm 139: 23 "know"
[4] Bruce K. Waltke, James M. Houston, and Erika Moore, *The Psalms as Christian Worship: A Historical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 568.

lying down, And are acquainted with all my ways. [4] Even before there is a word on my tongue, Behold, Lord, You know it all. (Ps. 139:1-4)

G. It is interesting to notice that a worshipful poem set to music (a psalm) beginning with an unparalleled declaration that God knows all things should end with a request for God to search that same person.[5] Why does David pray asking God to do what David already knows to be the case? David clearly doesn't think God will learn new information about who David is. God already knows every event from every day of David's life, even before those days occur (Ps. 139:16). David is not giving God access or permission to information that God doesn't already have. Instead, David is expressing his openness and willingness to surrender to and live within the knowledge God has of him.

H. David is wanting to develop and deepen his relationship with God.[6] David is welcoming God's incredible depth of insight about who David is, his spiritual condition, his needs, his course of life, his thoughts, his emotions, his actions, and all his faults to influence David for his benefit and development.[7] Instead of running away from God in fear (Ps. 139:7-12), which is a natural reaction to the realization of God's knowledge of us, David is embracing and desiring it. David knows enough about who God is that all of God's thoughts and knowledge about who David is doesn't scare him. Instead, it becomes a source of security, comfort, and peace (Ps. 139:17-18). The thoughts and knowledge that God has of David is valuable to him.

I. As this Psalm indicates, every person has a choice to make regarding God's knowledge of them: run or relinquish. We can run from God's knowledge of us in fear in a pointless attempt to hide from God, or we can be like David by openly and willingly laying ourselves before God and welcome God's correction and direction into our lives.[8] We can either run from who God is and rebel against the idea that we are accountable to Him, or we can relinquish and surrender ourselves to God's knowledge of us.

J. The reality is, God knows every fact and piece of information about us. The perfect and comprehensive knowledge of God will either be used to accurately point out and punish all the wrong we have done or be used to help us grow, change, and improve. The choice is ours. Our reaction will not change the reality that God knows everything about us. God's knowledge of us can either help us or hurt us; we get to decide.

K. Be encouraged to stop the pointless attempt to hide from God. No matter how desperately a person may want to escape God's knowledge and evaluation of them and their life, this outcome is impossible. Even those who spend their entire lives running away from God, attempting to live their lives independently of him, will still end up standing before Jesus to have themselves and their lives morally evaluated by Jesus. David took great comfort in being fully known by God. Those who are disconnected from God do not.

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[5] James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms 107–150: An Expositional Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 1212.
[6] Robert L. Jr. Hubbard and Robert K. Johnston, "Foreword," in *Psalms*, ed. W. Ward Gasque, Robert L. Hubbard Jr., and Robert K. Johnston, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012), 487.
[7] James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms 107–150: An Expositional Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 1212.
[8] R. C. Sproul, ed., *The Reformation Study Bible: English Standard Version (2015 Edition)* (Orlando, FL: Reformation Trust, 2015), 996.

L. The famous atheist Christoper Hitchens explained his perspective on an all-knowing God:

> Ask yourself if you wish this to be true: a celestial dictatorship that watched over you from the moment you were born, actually the moment you were conceived, all through life, night and day, knew your thoughts—waking and sleeping…under permanent surveillance, control, and supervision. And doesn't even let go of you when you are dead…my question is this: who wishes that that were true…in a celestial North Korea.[9]

III. Search Me to Evaluate My Thoughts

A. David doesn't just pray for God to be aware of all the information and facts that are true about who David is and how he lives, he also wants God to evaluate and test him:

> [23] Put me to the test and know my anxious thoughts; (Ps. 139:23)

B. David wants God to evaluate him to determine which good qualities he has, but also what faults and imperfections remain in him.[10] The Biblical imagery commonly used for testing includes refinement as in precious metals being heated up by fire for the purpose of removing impurities (Zech. 13:9, Mal. 3:2-3). David doesn't just want to be evaluated; he wants to be changed and transformed because of the evaluation (Ps. 26:2). The evaluation and divine assessment being done by God serves a good purpose in the life of David. He wants God to transform and improve him through a process of divine refinement by the Spirit of God.

C. David explains in more detail what he means by having his heart and thoughts tested in another Psalm that he wrote:

> [9] Please let the evil of the wicked come to an end, but establish the righteous; For the righteous God puts hearts and minds to the test. [10] My shield is with God, Who saves the upright in heart. (Ps. 7:9-10)[11]

D. David knows and understands that positive evaluations from God lead to and produce the blessings and favor of God, including stability, protection, and rescue. While God gives good blessings to everyone, those who are upright and righteous receive a greater blessing and favor from God that other people do not experience. This isn't favoritism, it's justice. Those who do good deserve to be rewarded. God is also generous, so He rewards those who love Him and are good more than they deserve. It is just for God to give good people good rewards and to withhold good rewards from those who are not good people.[12] This is a general principle that God operates by.

E. Despite all the blessing and favor of God in David's life, David is still aware that he fails God with an occasional lack of trust because he still has anxious thoughts ("and know my anxious thoughts", v. 23). Apparently, the favor and blessings of God do not eliminate all difficulties and hardships in David's life. The favor of God exists and is maintained within the challenges of life. Just because a person finds favor and blessing with God doesn't mean their life will always be

[9] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sD0B-X9LJjs&t=588s

[10] Logos 10 Bible Study Software Exegetical Guide on Psalm 139:23 "Put…to the test"

[11] Psalm 17:3

[12] We must also make the mistake of assuming God's rewards are what we want such as physical health, larger amounts of money, or a comfortable and stress-free life. God's rewards are frequently different than what we expect.

easy. Like the next spiritual problem mentioned by David, anxious thoughts are a flaw that David wants God's help to resolve.

F. What is David anxious about? Typically, there are two answers given: either David is concerned about how God will assess him (v. 23), or he is anxious about the physical danger created by the enemies of God (v. 19). The most likely answer is that David is concerned about the harm wicked people are set on doing to him.[13] If you are familiar with the life of David, you know the hostility and violence that was directed toward him constantly. David frequently found himself in physically dangerous situations with people in power seeking him out to hurt him. Facing real and serious danger caused David to have anxious thoughts from time to time.

G. David's prayer request may not make sense to some since it is contrary to the way a modern person typically thinks. David doesn't assume every thought he had or every emotion he feels is good and right as a modern person does. Although a lot of people think they can create their own reality and their thoughts and feelings are always assumed to be true and right, our thoughts and feelings are not the standard by which everything should be judged or evaluated.[14] Instead, our thoughts and feelings are to be judged by God's thoughts and feelings (Jer. 11:20, 17:10, Jn. 8:16). God is in charge, we are not. Even though this is a fact that many people struggle with and don't like, it remains to be true about reality. We are not the ultimate standard, God is. It is good and healthy to be a bit skeptical about our own judgment and perspective.[15] Our human assessment and perspective, even on ourselves, can be mistaken; God's never is.

H. At this point, the Biblical worldview comes into conflict with a worldly worldview. There is no compatibility between the two perspectives. Each person much choose which side they are on. It is inconsistent and incoherent to try to sit on the fence. The rules for life are either inside us or outside us. Either we get to make up the rules or God does. Either we are in charge and have the final say or the word of God tells us what we should do. Either there is a healthy way of life that is outside us that we should conform to or there are no rules and however a person decides to live on the inside is what goes. Life can't operate both ways at the same time.

IV. Search Me to Stop Hurtful Habits

A. As God is testing and evaluating David, David wants God to discover and reveal any problematic elements of who David is:

> [24] And see if there is *any* hurtful way in me, (Ps. 139:24)

B. A second problem noticed by David is not only anxious thoughts, but it is also habits and tendencies that David has that wrongfully hurt others. The searching and knowledge of God in our lives leads to correction and improvement ("And see if there is any hurtful way in me", v.

[13] Geoffrey W. Grogan, *Psalms*, The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 218, Tremper Longman III, *Psalms: An Introduction and Commentary*, ed. David G. Firth, vol. 15–16, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2014), 454.

[14] For more on this tendency of unhealthy self-determination see chapters 9 and 11 in Frank Turek and Phoenix Hayes, *The War on Reality: Recovering Truth in a World That Celebrates Lies* (Harvest Apologetics, 2026).

[15] Michael Wilcock, *The Message of Psalms: Songs for the People of God*, ed. J. A. Motyer, vol. 2, The Bible Speaks Today (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2001), 261.

24). God is investigating and searching us to find out where the remaining sin is.[16] There is both an internal and an external element to this probing of God. Biblically speaking, a "way" is usually thought of as a code of conduct or manner of living—external actions.[17] At the same time, David understands our actions come from the heart internally, just like Jesus would later explain (Mt. 15:18-20). This is why he says, "in me". David is not just concerned with what comes out of him, he wants the source of his actions fixed by God as well—that which is inside. A person with an open heart toward God that also possesses a desire to have God shape them to become a better person will invite the Spirit of God to find problematic tendencies both internally and externally.

C. A hurtful way is a regular and repeated course of action that causes offense.[18] This Hebrew term is only used in reference to childbirth (1 Chr. 4:9) and the difficulties faced by the nation of Israel (Isa. 14:3). We need to be very clear on how we define offenses. It is assumed that the action in question is morally wrong, not just doing something another person doesn't like or appreciate. A genuine offense was created; a moral wrong was acted on. The word literally means painful or to hurt or cause pain,[19] possibly an inward injury felt as grief or something offensive which provokes anger.[20] It isn't clear who the injury is done against. The hurtful course of life could be done against the others, God, or self—or all of them combined. Given the overall focus of the Psalm, and David in general, the primary reference could likely be directed toward God, but other people are usually impacted as well. Human disobedience and rebellion against God does hurt and negatively impact Him (Ezek. 6:9, 16:43, Isa. 43:24, 63:10, Ps. 78:40). David longs for a better and healthier relationship with God.

D. In these last two requests, David recognizes that there are two broad common ways of life that people align themselves with. David is referring to a lifestyle or pattern or acting. This first way of life is one that is full of pain and grief being self-focused apart from God (Ps. 10:3-4). Throughout the psalms, this is the course of life followed by the wicked. People who don't prioritize or pursue God end up living a life full of offenses and relational hostility. David is asking for this way of life to be removed from him.

E. Throughout this psalm, there is a deeply personal relationship and interaction between David and God. This direct and individual dynamic plays out throughout David's life and is a source of encouragement and growth. David has been deeply impacted by and continues to be influenced because of His interpersonal connection with God. David is focused on knowing and pleasing the divine person whom David shares his life with. David wants God to help him stop anything in his life that is at odds with what God desires. David greatly desires his life to please God in every way.

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[16] Logos 10 Bible Study Software Exegetical Guide on Psalm 139:24 "see"
[17] Logos 10 Bible Study Software Exegetical Guide on Psalm 139:24 "way"
[18] Logos 10 Bible Study Software Exegetical Guide on Psalm 139:24 "hurtful"
[19] Bruce K. Waltke, James M. Houston, and Erika Moore, *The Psalms as Christian Worship: A Historical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 568–569.
[20] Bruce K. Waltke, James M. Houston, and Erika Moore, *The Psalms as Christian Worship: A Historical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 569.

F. Like David, we should be concerned about the impact our thoughts, character, and actions have on others, but especially on God. Who we are and how we live impacts God both positively and negatively. If we love some life pursuits more than God, He is hurt like a husband whose wife doesn't pay attention to or spend time with him. When we intentionally do what we know is displeasing to God, He is hurt like a husband whose wife completely ignores and disregards his desires and preferences. How we live genuinely impacts God, and this dynamic should influence how we live as disciples. We should care about eliminating all offensive tendencies we have so our relationship with God can be as healthy as it can be.

V. Search Me to Teach Me How to Live

A. David invites God to use His vast and accurate knowledge of David not just to find and correct his faults, he also wants God to show him how to correct those faults and live a healthier, more honorable lifestyle. David recognizes his own insufficiencies and is relying on the influence of God to help him live a better and more productive quality of life. David knows he needs to learn more about what it means to live for God and do life God's way.

B. Here is David praying for God's direction in his life:

> [24] And lead me in the everlasting way. (Ps. 139:23-24)

C. David once again admits his own limitations and areas of lack. He finds himself continually reaching out to God for help through prayer ("And lead me", v. 24). David is asking God to be in charge of his life.[21] David's petition is for God to teach and guide him so that he can live in a way that is glorifying to God and good for him (Ps. 5:8, 23:3, 37:11, 43:3, 61:2). As we look at other statements from David where He used the term "lead" in reference to himself, we get a much clearer picture of what he means by this very general statement.[22]

D. The essence of what David is asking for is more fully captured in another written statement from David:

> [10] Teach me to do Your will, For You are my God; Let Your good Spirit lead me on level ground. (Ps. 143:10)

E. David is after transformative learning through the influence of the Spirit of God that results in implementing what is learned in his life. This is what it means to be led by God. He wants to know the ways of God through the word of God (Ps. 12:6, 18:30, 19:8, 25:5, 86:11). This will lead David into the unchanging and eternal ways of God ("in the everlasting way", v. 24).[23] God doesn't change the rules for healthy living. God doesn't pull us in one direction one minute and another direction the next. God is consistent and steady. He doesn't move. God's way of life lasts forever without beginning or end. God's way of life is a direct result of who He is. That which is good and right will not change because it is grounded in God's character. Jesus is also the same yesterday, today, and forever, which makes His teachings and ways a solid foundation for developing a life on (Heb. 13:8).

F. Contrary to the way of life of those who don't know God is the way of life of those who are closely connected to God. The second way of life, the everlasting way, is the lifestyle of the

[21] Logos 10 Bible Study Software Exegetical Guide on Psalm 139:24 "lead"
[22] Although a different sense is used see also Ps. 25:5, 25:9, 27:11, 31:3, 68:6
[23] The only other times this noun is used in the same sense is Ecclesiastes 3:11 and 12:5.

godly and righteous. David is asking God to teach him how to live according to God's ways. This mode of conduct, God's way of life, results in life, joy, and the enjoyment of morally good pleasures (Ps. 16:11).[24] His ways are perfect and without fault or flaw (Ps. 18:30). God can't be blamed for giving bad life advice. If a person thinks this, they are attempting to judge God by their own misplaced priorities. David is asking God to continue to help him grow in his understanding of God's way of life so that he can benefit from it. He wants to know what God cares about and how God operates.

G. Here is an especially insightful quote about the nature of sin:

> Sin isn't only doing bad things, it's consistently aiming life at the wrong target. At its core, sin is the habit of putting yourself first, especially ahead of God.[25]

H. Sin is not merely wrong action; it is also aiming at the wrong priorities and values. Everyone sins by aiming life at the wrong target of self rather than the proper target of God. David is asking God to help him aim his life toward the right target. He wants to continue walking and growing in God's way.[26] There is a way of doing life that is good for us—God's way—and a way of doing life that is harmful to us—our way. Notice that David acknowledges that he needs God's help to know the way because the good way of life is not in him.[27] God needs to be in charge of David's life and instruct him how it should be lived to find a healthy and flourishing experience of life in the midst of all the brokenness and wrongdoing we encounter in this world.

I. There is a practical step we can take to implement what David is praying for. Those who want to learn how to be instructed by God in His way of life should read, meditate on, and respond to Psalm 25 (another key Psalm on this topic is Psalm 37).

VI. Conclusion

A. God creates a clean heart in us through the activity of His Holy Spirit, and David identifies four specific ways this sanctifying work is carried out in his life. A prayer life that pleases God will pray for God to do these same works in us. A prayer life that focuses on the health and growth of our soul is a prayer life aligned with the priorities of God. If disciples prayed as much for health of their soul as they do about the health of their body, circumstances, and bank account, they would be much better off. What we consistently pray for reveals our true priorities in life.

B. As disciples, we need to develop and maintain an open and welcoming attitude toward God. This will motivate us constantly reach out to Him for help in cleaning our heart and growing in the spiritual life He provides. The Holy Spirit can create and strengthen a desire within us to be transformed in the ways God desires us to be changed so that we want what God wants.

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[24] Psalm 1, although not attributed to David (it is anonymous and still could be David), artistically captures this way of life.

[25] Frank Turek and Phoenix Hayes, *The War on Reality: Recovering Truth in a World That Celebrates Lies* (Harvest Apologetics, 2026), 157.

[26] James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms 107–150: An Expositional Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 1211.

[27] Alexander Maclaren, "The Psalms," in *The Expositor's Bible: Psalms to Isaiah*, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll, vol. 3, Expositor's Bible (Hartford, CT: S.S. Scranton Co., 1903), 327.