

# Psalm 139:23-24

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/ps/ps-139/psalm-13923-24/>

*David asks God to examine him and his character, identifying the sin so that God can show him the way to eternal life.*

In previous verses (1-4; 7-16), David has extolled the omniscience (all-knowing), omnipresent (present in all places), omnipotent (all-powerful) God. Now he asks that God, who already knows everything, to *search me* and to *know my heart*. It is clear that David does not doubt that God already knows him and everything about him. Rather, he is placing himself before God as someone who wants to be actively known and seen. While David may make errors, he wants to have the right disposition in his *heart*, one of repentance. His concern with his internal character is the reason David was considered to be a man after God's "own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14).

The Hebrew word translated here as *heart* is "levav" and includes what we might call the "mind." It is used to refer to thoughts and intentions (Genesis 20:5-6; Leviticus 19:7). It also includes resolve, courage, or fear (Leviticus 26:36) including discouragement (Deuteronomy 1:28). Here David is inviting God into his innermost thoughts, and asking God to alter his perspective to see things truly, as God sees them, and to help David walk in ways that prosper his soul.

David asks God to *try* him, to know his *anxious thoughts*, and to *see if there be any hurtful way in him*. David's *anxious thoughts* likely stem from a lack of trust in God, or an improper perspective. In either case, aligning with God's perspective is the solution. David recognizes that he cannot accomplish gaining God's perspective on his own, and asks for assistance. This is an assistance God is happy to provide, according to many verses in scripture (Proverbs 3:5-6; Luke 11:13; James 1:5, 4:2-3).

David's invitation to God would include dealing with thoughts that distract him or cause him to lose confidence in God. David is not living the illusion that he can hide anything from God. He already expressed that God knows all. Since God knows all, David is inviting Him into his inner being (*heart*) to engage intimately, and help Him discover what is true. This is what Jesus advocates all believers do, to hear His voice, invite Him in to have intimate fellowship, to learn and live a perspective that is true (Revelation 3:19-20).

Anxious thoughts themselves are not the problem—David does not seem to suggest that he should not experience them. David does however, recognize that he is in control of what he does with his thoughts. He seems to be asking God to put his thoughts on trial, in order to direct David in how to manage his anxious thoughts. This might be an illustration of how to accomplish this New Testament admonition:

“Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you.”  
(1 Peter 5:6-7)

These verses from 1 Peter encourage believers to shift their dependence fully onto the Lord, trusting Him rather than the world, or people in the world, to be exalted. In doing so, our care shifts from the impossible task of always pleasing others to believing God's promises. But in order to do this, we must redirect our thoughts. David recognizes the necessity of asking for God's aid in accomplishing this adjustment to his mindset.

David also asks God to identify the *hurtful way* that might be in him. David has now shifted from thoughts to actions. This is appropriate since thoughts lead to actions. David does not want to choose ways that are *hurtful*. Some translations render *hurtful* as "wicked." The Hebrew word translated *hurtful* is in other verses translated "sorrow." All fit, since walking apart from God's ways lead to our own hurt. Wickedness or sin is simply walking apart from God's ways. All such choices ultimately lead to death (Deuteronomy 30:19-20; Romans 6:23). Death is separation, and when we choose the ways of wickedness, we separate ourselves from the blessings of walking in God's ways.

The idea of a *hurtful way* could refer to a sinful habit. Often, we are blind to habitual sin in our lives, focusing instead on the sins that we can identify as mistakes that are out of character for us. No human has to be taught to rationalize. David seems to recognize this, and asks God to enter deeply into his innermost being and show him what is actually true. In doing this, David is recognizing the reality that it will be our ultimate destiny, as stated in Hebrews:

"For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do."  
(Hebrews 4:12-13)

David appears to recognize reality here, that God already judges to the very division of soul and spirit, so David wants God to reveal to David what is there, and set straight both his thoughts (*heart*) as well as his deeds (*way*).

As an application, each of us could ask God to reveal the sins we are committing that we have normalized in our lives to the point that we don't even identify them. We can ask God to redeem our perspective, so we can see those sins as self-destructive, which is the true reality for any sinful behavior. This can lead us to make decisions to avoid walking in a *way* that is *hurtful*. David recognizes here that his true self-interest is in setting aside self, and self-rationalization, and replacing it with a trust in God and His ways.

By asking God to *try* him, David is communicating to God that he knows his responsibility for his thoughts and his actions. Although God knows everything and has power of everything, David understands that this does not mean that God causes his actions. He wants God to examine him, as if on trial, as a person who chose those things. The word translated *try* can also be rendered as "search." David is asking God here to do a thorough examination, like a dermatologist screening for skin cancer.

He makes his motive clear in the final line of the psalm: so that God will lead him *in the everlasting way*. The purpose of God knowing him, and knowing us, is so that He can redeem us from making poor choices. God can lead us to see things truly, and adopt a perspective that is true. And God can lead us to make choices that are for our benefit, rather than making choices that are *hurtful*.

The *everlasting way* is the way to benefits that last forever, rather than benefits that are fleeting. David desires to live in a manner that will gain eternal benefit, rather than simply temporal benefit. Presuming David wrote this while ruling as king, it is quite a remarkable perspective. David recognizes that even the highest perch of earthly success is still temporary. He seeks a benefit that is *everlasting*.

Gaining *everlasting* life is a major theme of the New Testament. Eternal life is both a gift as well as a reward, similar to physical life. Each human receives physical life as a gift. But the fullness of their life experience is substantially impacted by their choices. We believers receive a spiritual rebirth just as the Israelites were delivered from the venom of snakes by looking upon a bronze snake lifted up on a pole. We receive the healing gift of being born again by having faith to look upon Jesus, hoping to be delivered from the venom of sin (John 3:3,14-16). Thus we receive eternal life as a gift, freely given by God, through Christ being lifted up on the cross (John 3:14; Colossians 2:14).

Once born of the Spirit, we are redeemed to make choices that lead to the reward of eternal life (Romans 2:7; Mark 10:17-22). David invites God into his innermost being, that he might make choices that lead to life (Deuteronomy 30:19-20).

If we want the greatest benefit available from life, then we need God to lead us. We need God's help to recognize what perspectives are true, and we need to be obedient in following His ways. Humility is recognizing reality as it is. Part of reality is that God already knows everything we did and will do, and He has power over all things. So when we simply recognize this, and ask His help in reorienting our perspectives and actions to ways that are beneficial to ourselves rather than hurtful, we are embracing reality as it is. We are also sowing to our greatest possible benefit in life. The way to inherit the reward of the inheritance of God's kingdom is to apply this attitude in all things we do:

“Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve.” (Colossians 3:23-24)

### **Biblical Text**

**<sup>23</sup> Search me, O God, and know my heart;**

**Try me and know my anxious thoughts;**

**<sup>24</sup> And see if there be any hurtful way in me,  
And lead me in the everlasting way.**