

Psalm 139

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[0 : 0 0] and then to Psalm 139 and consider what we can learn in these final two verses of the Psalm.

Search me, O God, and know my heart. Test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me and lead me in the way everlasting. We've come, or we're coming, to the end of our study of the Psalm. We have been taken by the hand, as it were, to an encounter with God, the God who knows all things as the Psalm begins, the God who is everywhere, the God who is creator and judge, and the psalmist has bowed down in adoration before such a God. And I trust that we also have done the same before such a God, and that our deepest desire, as His deepest desire was, that our lives would be lived in a manner that is pleasing to the God described in this Psalm. What about you, gathered here this evening? Do you long to live a life that is pleasing to God, a life with purpose and direction and hope? Well, if you do, then pay attention to what God would say to us through His Word this evening. Let's consider then the petition with which the psalm concludes, Search me, O God, and the words that follow. In considering these verses, we'll do so in such a way as to recognize that their application is extensive and varied to us all, even though we may be in different situations and circumstances. Almost regardless of the specific situation that we may be in, recognizing that these words were penned in a specific situation, and they bear very direct reference to what has gone before. And though we won't be highlighting that in great deal this evening, it is good to flag that truth that these words penned by the psalmist do bear direct relation to what has just gone before, to these sobering words, and in a sense, disturbing words of the psalmist as he expresses his hatred towards the enemies of God.

And he is conscious that some might quibble with his language, some might more than quibble, some might oppose him for expressing himself in such a way. And these final words almost are words where the psalmist seeks vindication from God for expressing himself in such a way. Search me, O God, know my heart. Test me and know my anxious ways. See if there is any offensive way in me. I am accused of being offensive. I am accused of saying things that ought not to be said. Well, I lay myself bare before you that you might vindicate me. So, these words of the psalmist very much bear direct relation to what has gone before. But while we recognize that, as we will consider them this evening, we will be seeking to discover how these words can be applied to our situation today, even if ours may be different to the situation that the psalmist found himself in. Well, that's simply by way of introduction.

As we consider these verses then more generally, we find, I think, two things that we want to focus on. First of all, we find a petition. Indeed, the whole of this part of the psalm, these two verses, is effectively a petition. But we also can identify a purpose that lies behind the petition. And that's the manner in which we're going to be considering these two verses. First of all then, a petition. We have it there at the beginning of verse 23.

Search me. Search me. Search me, O God, and know my heart. Test me, and know my anxious thoughts. It's worth noting that the psalmist ends not simply recognizing that his God is a searching God.

[4 : 30] That is a truth that the psalm began with. There in verse 1, O Lord, you have searched me and you do know me. He began by recognizing that his God knew him, that his God had searched him and knew him.

And there's a sense in which that truth was, while at one level a comforting truth, at another level quite a disturbing truth for the psalmists to have been searched, to have been laid bare by God. And yet, here he closes the psalm requesting that God would search him. He is desirous that God would indeed search him and know his heart. And so he comes to God with this petition. Indeed, the verb that we have here, search me, O God, is an imperative. Now, if we take that in a literal, grammatical way, we can say that he's ordering God to search him. Now, I don't think that we should understand that as being presumptuous of the psalmist. Who is he to order God? Who are we to order God? Rather, I think that he uses this form of the verb to introduce into what he says, urgency. That this is something that he really wants. This is something that he requests from the very bottom of his heart.

Search me, O God. This is what is needful for me, that you would search me, that you would know me, that you would test me. And so he comes to God with this urgent petition. Search me, O God, and know my heart. I think there's three questions we can pose concerning this searching or this examination that the psalmist is searching for or is seeking after. I think these are the three questions. And we'll pose the questions and then endeavor to give an answer to them. First of all, what is it that God is to search or examine? Search me, O God. Very well, but what is he to search? What is God to search? What is God to examine in the psalmist? Then secondly, what kind of searching or testing, as we see another verb used here, what kind of searching or testing is implied? And then thirdly, what is God likely to find? As God would respond to this request, that God would grant this request and would indeed search the heart of the psalmist, what will he find? So three questions that we can now proceed to try and give an answer to. What is it that God is to search or examine? Well, that which only

God can search and examine? Search me, O God, and know my heart. Know my heart. Not the exterior, not the outward behavior and lifestyle of the psalmist, not the image that perhaps is being projected to others, nor indeed the opinions that others might hold of the psalmist, be they good or bad. These are not the things that God is to examine. These are not the things that the psalmist asks God to examine. Rather, he asks that his heart be searched. God is to search. God is to examine the heart of David. And the heart represents the seat of David's personality, the source of all that he is and thinks and says, be that good or bad. That is what God is to search and examine. And God, of course, is a God who continues to do this work, and he would do this work in your heart. And so, a question that might be posed for those of us who might dare to repeat this request of the psalmist, who might be so bold as to ask God to do such searching in our hearts. The question as we would launch into that discovery might be, how's your heart?

How's your heart? Many of you know Kenny MacDonald, the retired minister of Roskeen, and he would often pose that question to folks with whom he was seeking to engage in spiritual conversation and draw the conversation to eternal things. And often this would be the manner in which he would do so. How's your heart? How's your heart? I was told that on one occasion he was speaking to a man who did indeed have physical heart problems that he knew nothing of. And the man was of the opinion that the minister knew nothing of his health problems. And Kenny came to him and he said, well, how's your heart? And the poor man was somewhat disturbed at the minister's knowledge of his situation. But the question, of course, is a very helpful one and a very searching one. Even the question is a searching one. How's your heart?

[9 : 32] How's my heart? Not what people see, not what you're able to project to others, not the visible or the outward, but how's your heart? Whatever the answer to that question is, whatever the condition of your heart, even this evening, one thing is certain. God knows. He searches and examines the heart. You see, when God examines us, when God examines you and when God examines me, he's not overly concerned with those things that concern us. Those things upon which we determine the value of a person and the merit that that person may have. Maybe the academic achievements or the grades that he's able to achieve in exams or the house we live in or the salary that we command, the reputation that we enjoy. God is not overly concerned with these things. When he searches a man, when he examines a woman, he examines our heart. And so again,

I pose this question to you, how's your heart? What is it then that God is to search or examine? Well, the answer is the heart of the psalmist. Search me, O God, and know my heart. But a second question we can pose is one that we've already mentioned and now proceed to consider. What kind of searching or testing is implied? And there's maybe a few things that we could say, but if we did have to summarize what we wish to say in a single word, we might use the word exhaustive. What kind of searching? Exhaustive searching. What kind of testing?

Exhaustive testing. He is, after all, our God, the one who knows all things. The psalmist has already made reference to this truth in the beginning of the psalm. 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. And he goes on and we've already considered that part of the psalm. His searching is exhaustive for he is the God who knows all things. Every detail, every motivation, every attitude, every thought, be it anxious or fleeting or proud is known to God. The word in the original at the end of verse 23 that is translated in our version of the Bible as anxious thoughts is in actual fact just one word. But it is a word that points in the direction of anxious thoughts, hence the translation. It's a word that points particularly in the direction then of our anxieties, our fears, our doubts, our feelings of guilt, our disturbing thoughts. These things, says the psalmist, are known by God. These things will be discovered by God. These things that maybe even the psalmist himself would have difficulty in identifying because we are often very confused. We have great difficulty in examining ourselves, never mind presuming to examine others, a foolish thing to do by the by. But even as we seek to examine ourselves, we are so limited to read our heart and to discern our motivations. And we sometimes have difficulties.

We think, well, why did I do that? Was it just so that people would speak well of me? Of course, it was a good thing I did, but why did I do it? And we can struggle maybe with even understanding our motivations.

[13 : 05] Well, here the psalmist is aware that when God examines him, he will determine with total clarity these things, his anxious thoughts, his fears, his anxieties, his doubts, and so on, as already mentioned, all examined and known by God. And not just today's thoughts, but every thought in our personal life history is a life history examined and known by God. So, in answer to that second question, what kind of searching or testing is implied? It is exhaustive and it is one that will indeed identify every thought that there might be, and very particularly those that are anxious and disturbed and fearful.

But the third question that we had suggested we could pose to the text and hopefully find an answer to is, what is God likely to find? What is God likely to find when he engages in this examination and this searching of the heart of the psalmist? Well, the beginning of verse 24, it gives us a hint of at least part of what the psalmist, in any case, desired God to find. And it's maybe a surprising answer.

Verse 24, see if there is any offensive way in me. Now, we have already suggested and we hold to what we said at the beginning that there is a sense in which these words of the psalmist, this petition of the psalmist serves as a cry for vindication given what he has just been saying in the manner he has been expressing himself. And yet, as he does so, he does recognize and he is desirous that God would identify if there be any offensive way in him. Even though he feels justified in what he has said and in the opinions that he has expressed in the previous verses, nonetheless, he says, God, examine me. And if there be any offensive way, I want to know. I want to be told. Maybe I'm living oblivious to problems that there are within me and in my heart. I want to know. See if there is any offensive way in me. The concern of the psalmist is that God would identify that which is wrong, that which is sinful, that which is offensive in his heart.

Now, we can be sure that God responded to this petition. We can be sure that as David sincerely asked God to search him, we are not granted the outcome of that examination. We are not given information as to what God found as he searched and examined and tested David's heart. And yet, I think with a great measure of confidence, we can, in a measure, answer the question of what is God likely to find or what did God find on this occasion and indeed on every occasion when he examines a man's heart. Well, no doubt God did indeed find those things that were offensive to him. There is no doubt that God will have found those things that were sinful and wrong in David's heart, as he does in every heart. We think of the words of the prophet Jeremiah in chapter 17 and verse 9. The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? And of course, David's heart is included in that description, as is your heart and my heart. And we think of the words of Jesus in the gospel of Mark and in the seventh chapter. For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance, and folly. All these things come from inside and make a man unclean. And so we can be sure that when God searched David's heart, he did indeed find those things that were offensive, those things that were displeasing to him, as he will find in every heart. Our heart is our great problem. And the psalmist knew that full well, as it has been pithily expressed, and no doubt on different occasions you've heard this expression, the heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart. Our hearts are indeed the repository, if you wish, of much that is displeasing and repugnant, even to ourselves, and never mind to a holy God. Maybe to just illustrate or bring that to our minds in a,

I trust, more vivid way. Those of you, and I know there are many, maybe not all, certainly not all, but many of you who would be like me, regular viewers of Match of the Day or Sports Scene, and you'll know that a regular feature on these football programs is goals of the month. And you have the top ten goals of the month on your screens, and you can determine which are the best goals that have been scored. Well, just consider for a moment this rather unappealing thought, not rather, but profoundly unappealing thought, that here in this building there be a large screen, and there portrayed before us the ten most offensive thoughts of your week. This week that has gone by, the ten most offensive thoughts, they are displayed for all to see.

[18:57] Even the very prospect is one that makes you shudder. Our heart is indeed a great problem. It is indeed one where when God searches and examines, He finds much that is offensive. However, as we maybe just consider a little bit more deeply what the psalmist is saying, and consider a little bit more clearly, or with a little bit more precision, I suppose, what it is that the psalmist is requesting of God, there in verse 24, what he says, see if there is any offensive way in me. And focusing perhaps on this word way, which I think is, I'm sure, is, I'm sure, used advisedly and with a purpose by the psalmist. See if there is any offensive way in me. It would seem that the psalmist's concern is more than isolated sins, that he is very aware his heart is full of. But more than isolated sins, his concern is with habitual sin, with ingrained attitudes, with ways of thinking that will find expression, in ways of speaking and acting that don't please God.

David knows very well what he's like. He knows he's a sinner. He knows that he sins daily. That is not a surprise for him. That's not news for him. But what he is concerned about is if there be any offensive way, a manner of life, a lifestyle, those things that repeatedly and habitually would disturb his communion with God, that would disturb and would stand in the way of a communion and useful service for his God. That would stand in the way of the worship that he wishes to grant and offer to his God.

See if there is any offensive way in me. The believer sins. I sin and you sin. We all sin. But we cannot and must not walk in sin. The believer sins, but he cannot and must not practice sin as a lifestyle. Well, again, as we consider these words of the psalmist and this petition of the psalmist, once again, let's bring it back to ourselves. What about you? What does God find in your heart? And as we maybe continue thinking of this phrase, offensive way, and think of this word now, offensive. The word here translated, indeed, does justice to the word, that which offends, that which hurts, that which damages. And it speaks of damage that is done not only to the author of the sin, but to others. And of course, sin has that characteristic. Sin is not self-contained. We can't say, well, it's my life and I sin and it's my problem and I'll live with the consequences because, you see, my sin and your sin damages other people. It offends other people, not only their sensibilities. It is offensive. It is damaging. It is hurtful.

It produces suffering and tears. Sin has that characteristic. It shatters trust, produces shame.

It destroys relationships. Sin is offensive. Lying damages other people. Gossiping damages other people, not yourself. Behaving proudly or selfishly has consequences for others. It offends and it hurts and it damages others. And we could multiply the examples if we had the time to do so. But I'm sure you hear what I'm saying and agree that it is so. Our sin is offensive. It hurts. It damages, not just ourselves. It most certainly hurts and destroys and damages ourselves, but it hurts others.

[23 : 01] And of course, it is offensive, not only to others, but it is offensive to God. In fact, God is the first injured party by your sin. And that is what David does not want. He does not want to offend God.

And so he comes to God and he says, search me, know my heart, test me, know my anxious thoughts, see if there is any offensive way in me. I want to know so that I can repent of it, so that I can turn from it.

Tell me that this offensive way might not stand in the way of my worship, of my service, that this offensive way may not grieve the God whom I love and whom I wish to serve and worship.

And this knowledge that God has of our hearts that the psalmist seeks does not remain with God. The psalmist wants to know, however painful that knowledge might be, he wants to know, he needs to know, that he might seek pardon and forgiveness, that he might abandon that which is offensive, that he might change. And he wishes God to show him, to show him any offensive way that he would know and that he would repent of it. And as we ask God to search us, as we ask God to test us, we ask also that he would share with us the outcome of his searching, that we might know and experience conviction of sin as he highlights to us, as he demonstrates to us where we are and in what way we are offending him, in what way we are living lives that are not pleasing to him. As I say, this is not knowledge that we will enjoy knowing of or being shared with, but we need to know that as we do indeed experience conviction of sin, so we will be driven to the one who is able to forgive us. So we will be driven to Jesus who is ever ready to forgive a penitent sinner. We need to know our hearts. We need to be shown our hearts. Until we are shown our hearts, we will not appreciate the loveliness of Christ. Until we understand the gravity of our condition, we will not understand or appreciate the plenteous redemption that is available for us in the gospel. The story is told of a young maid in Switzerland, and this is, as I understand it, maybe over a century ago. And this is a story that I've always found helpful and illustrative.

And I say that because, because of that, you may find that it appears periodically from this pulpit. So if I do use the same story on more than one occasion, do feel free to just tell me so that it isn't used a third time. Two is okay, but three just is a bit tiresome. I don't think I've shared this with you before, but if I have, well, it's a good story. And the story is told then of this young maid in Switzerland. And a visiting preacher was being given accommodation in this large home. And he was in conversation with this young woman. And the conversation revolved around eternal things and spiritual matters. And she asked the preacher, well, what should I do that I might get right with God, that I might be a Christian, that I might be able to go and walk in the way that I should walk? What should I do? What should I pray? And the preacher said to the young girl, well, I'm going to give you one thing to pray, one thing for you to pray. And I will carry on my way, but I'll be back when I return from visiting other places and villages. I'll be back. But in the meantime, I want you to pray this prayer.

[27 : 01] Lord, show me myself. Or we might say, show me my heart. Show me my heart. And the girl was somewhat bemused. It seemed to her a rather strange prayer. She expected something a bit more difficult, a bit more challenging, indeed a bit more extensive, but such a simple prayer. She wasn't particularly impressed by this preacher. But she thought, well, there's nothing to lose. Nothing to lose. I'll do what he says. And so she did, somewhat skeptical, but sincerely prayed to God, show me myself. Show me myself. Or we might paraphrase it for the purposes of this sermon. Show me my heart. Well, the weeks passed and the preacher returned and he found this girl distraught, distraught and disturbed and under a deep shadow. And she said, I don't know what's happened. I don't know what you've done. Instead of helping me, you've left me in a worse condition. And I prayed the prayer that you asked me to pray.

And I'm overwhelmed by sorrow and by guilt. This isn't what I was looking for. And man said, well, that's good. Which didn't particularly enamor him to the young girl. That's good. But I have another prayer for you now. And this prayer is also a very simple prayer. And it is this. Show me Jesus.

Pray that to God. Show me Jesus. And well, I think the conclusion of the story I leave for you all to imagine for yourselves. But what the story illustrates is that if we are indeed to see Jesus and to understand Jesus and appreciate who Jesus is and what he can do for us, it is needful first for us to be shown our heart that we know who we are, that we would know our condition, that we would know our guilt, that we would know our sin. However unpleasant that experience undoubtedly is for us. And so I ask you this evening, will you ask God to show you your heart? Will you dare? Will you dare to pray this prayer? Search me, O God, and know my heart. Test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me and lead me in the way everlasting. A petition then. But then, much more briefly, we have in these two verses a purpose. A purpose that is revealed in what really is another petition. When the psalmist concludes the psalm with these words, and lead me in the way everlasting.

That is indeed a petition, lead me in the way everlasting. But it's a petition that reveals a purpose, or the psalmist's ultimate purpose, in desiring to be examined by God. And it is this, that his desire is that he would walk in this way everlasting. That is his purpose, that his walk would be a walk in this way. And we can maybe just say three brief things concerning this petition. Lead me in the way everlasting. The first thing is that it presupposes an existing reality. The psalmist is already in the way, but he requires help. He needs direction. And the question that we could pose for ourselves is, well, what about us? What about you? Are you already walking in the way? How do we begin walking in the way?

Well, we begin when we put our trust in Jesus as our Lord and Savior. It is then that we begin to walk in the way. And with the psalmist, we can say, Lord, keep me in the way. Lead me in the way. I'm in the way. I'm trusting in your Son Jesus, but I want to carry on in that way. I don't want to turn back. I don't want to turn to right or to left. Lead me in the way everlasting. It presumes an existing reality. But also, these words or this final petition of the psalm, in a measure, describes the way. What kind of way is it? Well, it's the way everlasting. The way everlasting in these two words would merit a sermon. But we will simply have to comment on them just very almost superficially. There are different ways of understanding this phrase, the way everlasting. Different ways that are perhaps complementary.

[31 : 24] Some understand it to be the ancient way. The way everlasting, the ancient way. The way of Abraham, the way of Isaac, the way of Jacob. The way laid out by God from time immemorial. The way of obedience, of commitment, of covenant loyalty. And the psalmist says, I want to be led in the ancient way.

I don't want any new way, but the old ways. That's the way that I want to walk in. The way that God has already established for His people in the everlasting, ancient way. That is the way in which I wish to walk. It can also be understood as the way that leads to everlasting life or eternal life.

Now and always that quality of life that God grants to those who know Him and trust in Him. And the psalmist says, I want to experience everlasting life. I want to walk in the everlasting way.

But then, of course, in the light of the New Testament, we discover that this way, this everlasting way has a name. And that name is Jesus. The one who was able to say and say today to you, I am the way, I am the way, the truth and the life. I am the way. I am the everlasting way.

Walk in me. Walk with me. I am the way for you. And so these words in this petition describes the way.

[32 : 51] But then finally, it highlights the need that we have to be directed in the way. It speaks of a permanent walking with God. He does not send us on our way and then abandon us. He takes us by the hand and He walks with us. How does He do that? How does He guide us? It sounds nice, but how does that work? Well, He guides us by His Word. As we would study His Word and as we would meditate His Word, so we are guided by Him in the way everlasting. We are led by Him. We are taken by the hand by Him in the way everlasting.

And so, as we asked earlier on, how's your heart? We could maybe ask another question. How are you walking? How are you walking as a believer in Jesus Christ, as one who by grace finds himself in the way if indeed that is true of you? How are you walking? How important then that we pray as the psalmist had prayed. To pray this prayer, and as we take these two verses in that way, as a prayer that we can direct to God, to pray this prayer from the heart can constitute and indeed may constitute for you, even this evening, the beginning of a life as a disciple of Jesus. As you pray these words, if they are a prayer that you direct to God sincerely and for the first time, search me, O God, know my heart, test me and know my anxious thoughts, see if there is any offensive way in me and lead me in the way everlasting. This can be a prayer of commitment to God. This can be a prayer by which you begin your life as a believer in God, as a disciple of Jesus Christ. Pray this prayer in that fashion, if that is indeed where you are. But it can and should be the daily prayer of those of us who by grace are already in the way, who already find ourselves as disciples of Jesus. This is a prayer most suitable and most appropriate for us, and so may we pray this prayer. Let us pray.