

SCANNING THE SOUL PSALM 139:23-24

How many of you have ever had an MRI? An MRI, which stands for *Magnetic Resonant Imaging*, is a highly sophisticated camera that takes detailed and precise pictures of the human body. Not the outside of the body, but the inside—bone, vital organs, and soft tissue. It is a camera that is designed to reveal the cause of some malady or pain or problem that a doctor suspects could be serious.

Here's how it works: the patient is slowly inserted into a narrow tube, which is only slightly bigger than a coffin and almost as disconcerting. There he or she is subjected, for ten or so minutes at a time, to rather deafening noises that sound like jackhammers and machine guns. It is the camera at work. That camera moves back and forth taking a succession of pictures, one thin slice at a time, each of which are a cross section of a particular part of the body. It may take a hundred or more pictures from front to back—but it doesn't just stop there. It rotates as well from side to side and top to bottom, capturing images from all angles. The result is a stereoscopic, three-dimensional picture.

An MRI is able to expose every square millimeter of a given body part, enabling the physician to look at those pictures and determine the precise nature and location of the problem. With that information an accurate diagnosis can be made, plans for treatment can be implemented, and procedures can be performed that might alleviate the problem.

Magnetic Resonant Imaging is a medical marvel. Without it doctors can only make educated guesses, some of which may be accurate and some inaccurate. Without it we are ignorant of all the facts and details, and that *lack* of knowledge can seriously jeopardize the patient's health.

Not all of us will have reason to expose the inner recesses of our physical beings to an MRI. But there is another kind of MRI to which *all* of us need to subject ourselves, not once or twice, but frequently. We need it because we all suffer at times from the symptoms of spiritual malignancy—symptoms such as spiritual disorientation, sluggishness, paralysis, imbalance, amnesia, loss of spiritual appetite or vision.

When we have one or more of these symptoms we can be fairly certain that something is wrong, but we may be hard pressed to know the specific nature of the problem. We might examine ourselves, take our spiritual pulse, and come up with nothing. We may ask a friend or a counselor for their diagnosis, and still be uncertain as to what it is. That's because it may not be a surface problem. It may be something that is deeply embedded in our soul.

Not to worry, though, because there is a remedy. It amounts to a spiritual MRI. You will be happy to know that, unlike an MRI you get at a medical facility, it is a relatively simple procedure, and it is very inexpensive; though I must tell you it *can* be somewhat uncomfortable. However, no scheduling is required; it is performed upon request by a Physician who has been doing it for a long time, and, incidentally, has never once missed a diagnosis.

I believe, in modern language, this spiritual MRI is what the songwriter was asking for when he said in **Psalm 139:23-24**.

²³ *Search me, O God, and know my heart!
Try me and know my thoughts!*

²⁴ *And see if there be any grievous way in me,*

and lead me in the way everlasting!

Those of you who were here a few weeks ago may read these verses and be confused. They sound like a contradiction to the first few verses of this Psalm where David emphatically declared,

¹ *O LORD, you have searched me and known me!*

² *You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from afar.*

³ *You search out my path and my lying down
and are acquainted with all my ways*

God is omniscient. There is not the slightest deficiency in His knowledge. He knows everything there is to know about everything. And as that relates to us, He knows every strength and every weakness. He sees every shadow and every blemish.

So why would David ask God to search Him and know Him in verses 23-24 when it seems quite clear that God has already searched Him completely and knows Him perfectly?

I believe He is giving God a personal invitation to do an MRI of His soul *and reveal the results*. It's not for God's benefit. God already knows. It's for David's benefit. He wants to know what God knows. He doesn't want to live in the dark. In the words of John, he wants to walk in the light as He is in the light.

What is more, he admits that he can't make his own diagnosis. He may detect that something is wrong, but he needs the Great Physician to show him what it is. And so he says in **verse 23**. ²³ *Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts!*

Please understand the significance of this desire and request. Most of us are willing to expose *some* things about ourselves—things that aren't too embarrassing, things that aren't overly unpleasant or unbecoming. But there are some things most of us would prefer to keep hidden. And some of us will do just about anything to make sure they stay hidden.

It takes courage and humility to say, "Lord, I want you to scan my soul and reveal the results. I want you to bring to light those things in me that I'm not aware of—things I've grown so accustomed to or comfortable with that I am not conscious of them. Lord, expose the things my deceitful heart has convinced me are okay, perhaps even righteous, when in fact they may be sinful and grievous to you."

He says, "Know my heart." The core of my being—my desires, affections, and inner-most feelings; the part of me that makes decisions and acts upon them. "Lord, I am submitting that part of me to your scrutiny".

"Know my thoughts". The word translated "thoughts" in my version means *anxious* thoughts, cares, or concerns. It refers to thoughts that are associated with feelings of "restlessness", "uneasiness", or "uncertainty," which includes things like doubts, fears, temptations, burdens, and apprehensions.

Anxious thoughts may arise when I don't understand what God is doing in a certain situation, or when I think He should do it another way. They may arise when I want something very badly, but I can't seem to have it.

Anxious thoughts may fill my mind when I am facing unknown circumstances and am afraid. When the future is uncertain, when relationships are strained, or when I'm going through a crisis, and I don't know what to do.

Anxious thoughts may come when I'm not sure I want to trust God because it may hurl me out of my comfort zone, or it may take me somewhere I don't want to go.

“Know my heart...know my thoughts.” David is asking God to locate the spiritual malignancies that are embedded deep in his soul and expose them. “Go ahead, Lord, open me up. Show me what’s really inside me.”

It’s quite possible that some of us might be thinking, “Well, that’s okay for David. After all, he was a man after God’s own heart. But I’d rather not go there myself, because if God scanned my soul it may reveal something that I don’t really want to see, something that might need to be taken out, and I’m not too thrilled about surgery.”

Or you may be thinking, “I’m pretty sure there *are* spiritual malignancies in my soul, but I’d rather not deal with them. Sure, they’re a nuisance. Yes, they get in the way sometimes, but I’ve learned to manage them. I’m able to function relatively well in spite of them; I know how to camouflage them when I’m around other people so they don’t even know they are there. Besides, they’re not hurting anybody else, so I’ll just live with them, and leave well enough alone.”

There’s an important word in the beginning of **verse 24**. “[See if there be any *grievous way in me...*](#)” If you have a different version the word *grievous* may be translated something else. But the idea David is trying to convey here is something that is hurtful or sorrowful to someone else.

And that is very important for understanding the motive for wanting this MRI. It’s not merely so we can be enlightened about our problems and issues. It’s not primarily so we can find relief from our anxious thoughts and feel better about ourselves. Those may be the results, but not the motive.

The motive is to preserve and perpetuate a loving relationship with the Surgeon Himself. David is saying, “Lord, I don’t want anything in my life to be grievous to *you*. I respect you too much. I love you too much. And if you not only know everything about me but you reside everywhere within me, I don’t want there to be anything in my soul which would cause you pain or grief or offense.”

I doubt whether you would invite the President of the United States to be a guest in your home knowing the toilet was backed up and running out all over the floor. You wouldn’t say, “Mr. President, you’re going to have to pardon the smell and watch where you step because I just haven’t been able to get around to dealing with this problem.”

And yet how must God feel when the children *in whom He resides* allow the stink of sin to saturate their souls? God is holy. Sin is offensive to Him—any sin, no matter how small or inconsequential it may seem to us. And if we want to have an intimate relationship with Him, if we want Him to take pleasure in us to the fullest measure, then we’ve got to take sin seriously and not consciously cohabit with it.

According to 1 John a Christ follower is one who walks in the light as He is in the light. He’s not perfect—in fact, if he claims he is then he’s a liar and the truth is not in him. But when he becomes aware of the sin that’s in him he doesn’t just ignore it, or pamper it, or tolerate it. No. He confesses it and repents of it. She makes every attempt to remove it from her life—for that sin is grievous to God. That sin creates a barrier between her and the most precious Person in her life. That sin prevents him from enjoying sweet fellowship with his Father.

That’s what David is saying. “[See if there be *any grievous way in me.*](#)” “Lord, open me up completely, expose *all* the malignancies, and use your scalpel to remove them.”

What about you? Have you ever invited God to do an MRI of your soul, and then given Him the permission to perform the necessary surgery? I'm not merely talking about bad habits and vices and things that are obvious to you and others. Those things are usually only symptomatic of what is going on deep within you—things that are embedded in your soul, things that you may not even be aware of.

I'm talking about allowing Him to let you see things that can be hidden—things like pride, bitterness, greed, self-serving motives, hatred, or fear.

You say, "What do I do?" You simply give Him the permission, trust Him to do it, and then respond appropriately. Of course, you must cooperate with Him. You've got to be in a receptive mode, which means being humble. You've got to lay aside the clutter and noise in your life and be still in His presence, so you can hear His voice.

The secret to a successful MRI, as I discovered when I've had them, is the ability of the patient to lie perfectly still, for even the slightest movement can render the results illegible. I learned it's not easy to lie still like that, even for just a few minutes.

Of course, God can search us and know us even when we're moving around, but we cannot hear Him reveal the results if we're fidgety or distracted. We've got to stop and be still, so that we can hear His voice and then respond appropriately.

And please be aware that our Great Physician has a wonderful bedside manner. He doesn't lecture us on how terrible we are or how foolish we've been to allow ourselves to get into this precarious position. He doesn't scold us or condemn us. No, we're His children by faith in Christ. He loves us more than we could ever know. He is patient...and kind...and gentle.

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Main Idea: A healthy soul must regularly subject itself to God's scrutiny and frequently submit to His scalpel

An MRI of the Soul (23)

Symptoms of Spiritual Malignancy

Making the Request

Revealing the Results

A State of True Spiritual Health (23a)

Taking Sin Seriously

Protecting a Relationship

Trusting the Surgeon

The Way Everlasting (24b)