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PRAYER CHECKUP

*Search me, O God, and know my heart!
Try me and know my thoughts!
And see if there be any grievous way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting!*

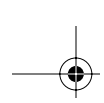
PSALM 139:23-24



Checkups in the interests of well-being are familiar features of modern life. The servicing patterns of new cars specify periodic checkups that must be done, and would-be buyers of secondhand models are told never, never to close the deal until a trusty expert has carried out a checkup of everything under the steed's shining hood. Middle-aged and elderly people are urged to have a physical checkup annually; and indeed checkup is defined in the *Canadian Oxford Dictionary* (1998) as "a thorough examination, especially of a person's general medical condition." Now the starting point for everything we will say in this chapter is our belief that the Christian's spiritual condition needs a regular checkup too, and that this is part of God's will for all his children. For, in particular, our praying cannot be healthier than is our spiritual life as a whole.

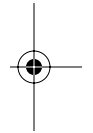
Have you ever thought of that? Have you ever had a spiritual checkup? Have you ever asked for one? Is this a new idea for you? As the Lord Jesus once pointed out (Lk 5:39), there is a principle of inertia in human nature that defies us to be open to new things when we feel we are doing comfortably with what we have already; a defiant insistence on





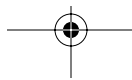
feeling we are all right makes many who have never had a physical checkup resent the idea that they might need one. In the same way, you may find the idea of a spiritual checkup repellent. Even if so, however, please stay with us, and let us put you in what we are convinced is the biblical picture on this matter.

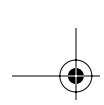
It is more than fourteen hundred years since Pope Gregory the Great wrote *Pastoral Care*, his insightful guide to pastors about their spiritual responsibility to those in their flock. In the third section of that book Gregory guides pastors, for well over a hundred pages, through such topics as “How to Admonish the Humble and the Haughty,” “How to Admonish Those Who Sin on Sudden Impulse, and Those Who Sin Willfully,” “How to Admonish Those Who Do Evil Secretly and Good Openly.” After all of this advice to pastors on how to challenge their parishioners, Gregory then wrote a short but deeply cutting (and curing) final chapter directed entirely to the pastor: “How the Preacher When He Has Done Everything as Required, Should Return to Himself, to Prevent His Life of Preaching from Making Him Proud.”¹ More than four hundred years ago Puritan teachers took a path like Gregory’s and spoke of pastors as “physicians of the soul” whom we should allow to examine us, probing our personal weaknesses and shortcomings and prescribing remedies for the restoring of our spiritual health (or, of course, the establishing of it, in cases where believers have yet never been in good condition). More than 250 years ago, John Wesley institutionalized mutual pastoral care of this kind in the band meetings (regular gatherings of between five and ten committed persons) that were the human building blocks of the Methodist societies;² at about the same time Welsh revival



¹St. Gregory the Great, *Pastoral Care*, trans. Henry Davis, in *The Works of the Fathers in Translation* 11, ed. Johannes Quasten and Joseph C. Plumpe (Westminster, Md.: Newman Press, 1955). Pope Gregory the Great lived from 540-604 and served as pope the last fourteen years of his life.

²On the bands see John Wesley, *A Plain Account of the People Called Methodists* (1748), in *Works*, ed. T. Jackson, 3rd ed. (1872; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), 8:248-74, esp. 257-59. The full rules for the bands are given on pp. 272-74.





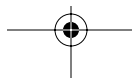
leader William Williams wrote *The Experience Meeting* to guide leaders of larger mutual-help groups of the same kind.³

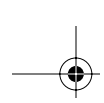
In many of today's practices of Christianity this pastoral structure is largely lost. Some Bible study groups center on the biblical text but avoid any personal response to that text. Some Christian sharing groups meet for mutual support in facing life's pressures and problems but shy away from specific directions for spiritual growth. And some spiritual directors (a breed almost extinct among Protestants until very recently) listen to people and counsel them in a therapeutic way in relation to what they themselves say about themselves, but do not press diagnostic questions about their life with God that might put them on the spot. To be sure, other writers, small group leaders, pastors and spiritual directors walk in the strong footprints of our spiritual forbears and challenge those in their care to let Scripture shape their lives, to examine their motives for hints of self-serving, and to seek connection (and correction) from the living God.⁴ The fact remains, however, that all Christian believers, both those who are making growth in grace their priority and those who are not, need spiritual checkups from time to time, and that is something we need to face.

This book is an exploration of the universal Christian experience of struggling in prayer, in face of all the difficulties and distractions that the world, the flesh and the devil put in our way to stop us praying to any good purpose. We have already identified with our readers as fellow strugglers, sharing what helps us in hope that it will help them too. So far, we have dwelled on what we may call God's I.D.; we have pictured

³William Williams, *The Experience Meeting* (Vancouver, B.C.: Regent College Publishing, 1995).

⁴For example InterVarsity Press publishes more than 150 Bible study guides for personal and group use, all of them emphasizing a combination of studying the biblical text and testing oneself to live, think, and pray accordingly. And Richard Foster, for instance, makes valuable contributions in the area of small group and personal spiritual formation as he draws from Scripture and from the whole history of Christianity in *Renovare's Spiritual Formation Workbook: Small Group Resources for Nurturing Christian Growth*; *Devotional Classics*; and *Spiritual Classics*, all published by HarperSanFrancisco.



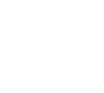


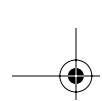
Christian living as a lifelong hike in our Savior's company; we have looked at how Bible-based meditation helps to form prayer; and we have hinted—hardly more—at the way the God-exalting, self-deflating, soul-expanding activity of praise lightens our path and rejoices our heart as our thoughts go forward to heaven. These themes together establish our overall landscape (or, as we put it earlier, they form the basic colors on our canvas) and so make up the big picture into which everything else that we have to say will be fitted, and of which all those items will be so many details.

But before moving on we must pause to note the need for regular checkups in relation to the ground we have so far covered, and to the praying that is truly the lifeline for all our Christian living. Why must we do this? Because admonitory checkups are a stated concern of our triune God, and if we have no time for them and give them no place, we will inevitably lose out. Many modern Christians seem unaware of this; some have very obviously come to grief as a result. The fact is that we will all pray more honestly and live more safely when we learn to regard checkup as a necessary spiritual discipline, and give it its proper place in our lives. So let us look at it now.

God calls all his people to be holy, that is, consciously, conscientiously and continuously set apart to live in his company and for his glory, with all that this involves. Nothing in Scripture, surely, is clearer than that! In Old Testament times God, having through Moses given Israel his laws, sent prophets (messengers, spokesmen) to rub those laws into the hearts of the Israelites by declaring to them what God thought of their lawless behavior and how they needed to change, and what would happen if they went on as before. So God through Jeremiah bewails false prophets, who said, professedly in God's name, that all was well when in fact it was not:

I did not send the prophets,
 yet they ran;
 I did not speak to them,





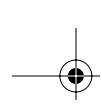
yet they prophesied.
 But if they had stood in my council,
 then they would have proclaimed my words to my people,
 and they would have turned them from their evil way,
 and from the evil of their deeds. (Jer 23:21-22; see also
 2 Kings 17:13-15)

And Daniel bewails failure to heed the words of true prophets: “We have sinned against you. . . . [A]nd have not obeyed the voice of the LORD our God by walking in his laws, which he set before us by his servants the prophets” (Dan 9:8, 10).

Then in the New Testament we find our glorified Lord Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, commandeering John as his amanuensis (we would say, secretary) to write seven business letters in the same standard format to seven Asian churches. The letters tell each church what Christ had seen in his checkup of them and what changes they must make in order to encompass the vital, forthright, fearless, faithful, trustful holiness that was his will for them, and would bring them all the grandeur promised to those who overcome. (The modern counterpart would be the employer who checks up on the performance of his employees and tells them that while some have done well, most of them need to pull their socks up, and adds that there is a terrific bonus awaiting those who do.) It is clear that the God whose eye is always on us, just as it is on the sparrow, is constantly checking up on the quality of our Christian lives, and we have to keep pace with him in this. That is why the best Christian teachers of all times make much of the discipline of self-examination.

For centuries exponents of Christian devotion—Patristic, Reformational, Puritan, Wesleyan, Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox—were in agreement on the importance of regular self-examination as a necessity for spiritual health. What they had in view was a measuring of ourselves, morally and spiritually, positively in terms of things done and negatively in terms of things left undone, by the behavioral ideals that God sets before us in his Word—that is in the Ten Commandments, the



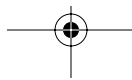
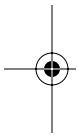


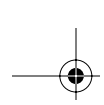
sermons of the prophets, the personal poems of the psalmists, the grave counsels of the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, the life and teaching of Jesus, and the practical exhortations of the New Testament letters. Whereas introspection, whether it ends in euphoria or in the gloom of self-pity and self-despair, can become an expression of self-absorbed pride, self-examination is the fruit of God-centered humility, ever seeking to shake free of all that displeases the Father, dishonors the Son and grieves the Holy Spirit, so as to honor God more. Thus self-examination is a fundamentally healthy process, leading into repentance, where mere introspection can leave us just feeling sorry for ourselves. The distinction between the two activities is clear, and it is a bad sign that so many evangelical Christians today seem unable to practice spiritual self-examination. That introspection, without intent to change, is basically unhealthy is generally agreed without a struggle, but the claim that spiritual self-examination is truly health-giving often has to be fought for, at least (sadly) among those who see themselves as Bible believers, and it becomes all too apparent that the practice of this discipline is rare.

Self-examination is so called in echo of Paul's words to the arrogant Corinthians: "Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves" (2 Cor 13:5). This command indicates that examining oneself is something that we sometimes have to do but conceals a possible misunderstanding as to how it is done. For the paradoxical truth is that we do it precisely by asking God to do it, and laying ourselves open to him for that purpose. At school we do not grade ourselves but are graded by our instructors, and we do not perform our own medical checkups but arrange for our physician to do them; and in this case we go to God to admit our lack of self-knowledge and to have him show us and tell us how we are doing spiritually. Thus our praying in this process begins with submitting and ends with listening. Let us see how it all works out.

GOD THE PHYSICIAN

Think for a moment of your annual physical checkup. A medical practi-

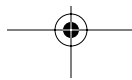


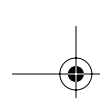


tioner, one who has studied both physiology and pathology and so can recognize both normal and defective processes in the human organism, takes notice of everything in your body that functions: your breathing, your blood pressure, your heart, your circulation, whether your eyes, ears and digestive system work properly, whether there is any particular malfunction of which you are conscious, whether there are any malfunctions of which you are not conscious, and whether there are any puzzling symptoms that need to be further investigated. That is how a thorough physical checkup goes. Now when God puts us through a spiritual checkup, a similar thoroughness is in evidence. He takes notice of all aspects of our inner life, the life about which only we and he know. Here are some examples of diagnostic procedures that he follows.

God checks up on our faith. Do we really know what we should know about God, and do we trust in Christ as we should? Do we look out for and take careful note of God's promises found in Scripture, and do we claim them in our prayers and rely on him to keep them? Does our faith bring us peace of heart—peace with God through forgiveness, peace with circumstances through leaning on the Lord, peace with people because through faith we love them? Or is that which we call our faith no better than superstition, groundless fancying, that is, about God and his ways, that leaves us fearful and frantic? Does our faith hold up in crises or give way under pressure? These are some of the main angles from which God checks up on our faith.

God checks up on our repentance. One of the beauties of worship services in the Anglican Prayer Book is the regular acknowledgment of sin and call to repentance. Over and over we see that repentance is more than a matter of regret and remorse for what has gone wrong; it is a matter of mounting resistance to the impulse to go wrong again. It is, in other words, a change of life that we are constantly seeking to make; a matter essentially of the will rather than the feelings. A life of repentance is, in reality, a life of self-denial. When Jesus talked about self-denial he was, as Richard Baxter the Puritan neatly put it, telling us that we have



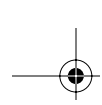


to say no to “carnal self,” that is, to our inner selfhood that has been shaped by sin into the mold of an ugly, self-serving egocentricity. This misshapen carnal self seeks to lead us along its own path, the path of self-centered self-indulgence, always reaching out to grasp and use power, position, privilege and possessions for purposes of pleasure and pride. Jesus warned that saying no to its specific urges may feel like gouging out our eye or cutting off our hand or foot—saying goodbye, that is, to something you feel you cannot live without—yet it has to be done, and God checks up on us to see whether or not we are doing it. For that, and nothing less than that, is the reality of our repentance.

J. I. recalls a conversation with a clergyman, at the end of which the cleric said abruptly, “Well, you must excuse me; I must go. I see I have some repenting to do.” So he went and spent the next hour doing it. Have you ever said anything like that to yourself? To a spiritual friend? What, really, do you know of personal repentance? Real Christianity is serious about penitently tracking down and turning from all the false steps of the past—and God checks up on our repentance.

God checks up on our love. The greatest command, according to Jesus, is a love for God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength, and alongside that, the next greatest requirement is a love for our neighbor—a love as wholehearted as the love we shower on ourselves. What is love? Whether directed to God, to a fellow human or to oneself, the purpose of love is to make the loved one *great*—God, by worship and service that exalts him; other persons, by care and help that meets their true needs; and oneself, by never aiming at less than the best. But sin in our system enslaves our natural self-love to unnatural pride, so as to keep us from loving God and others. So God exposes to our consciences, our self-absorption and self-centeredness, our tendency to focus entirely on ourselves and our own concerns. God knows that inordinate love of self keeps us from loving him enough to practice any form of self-sacrifice for him. He also knows that love of self keeps us from loving our neighbor in the ordinary sense of showing imaginative humanity, helping peo-





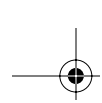
ple who need help—when it involves our own inconvenience. Christians are not always distinguished at either of those points. And love that is focused on self rather than on God and on others restricts and indeed strangles our praying in profound ways. As a test, bring to mind your last attempts to pray. Approximately what percentage of that prayer had to do with your own well-being as compared with the glory of God and the welfare of others? God presses upon us this kind of soul-searching. It is part of his loving checkup.

God checks up on our humility. The pride of which we have been speaking is one element in original sin; indeed, if Augustine and Thomas Aquinas and C. S. Lewis are to be believed, it is the essence of it. Pride is the passion always to be and to feel yourself to be number one in power and importance. The wily serpent in the Garden of Eden tempted wide-eyed Eve with the words, “You will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen 3:5). He was luring her toward the world’s first gesture of pride, and she took his bait. In yielding to Satan’s deceptive ploy, Eve and Adam let pride anchor itself within, and human nature was from then on permanently distorted. So pride is still there in our hearts, engendering self-confidence and self-reliance at points where no such attitude ought to enter so that we don’t depend on our God as we should; engendering self-aggrandizement so that pleasing God as a life goal is excluded; and engendering also conceit and self-satisfaction of a spiritually killing kind. To be puffed up with pride at our own achievements is to be very sick in one’s soul.

Pope Gregory the Great in his classic *Pastoral Care* warned that pastors are vulnerable to pride. In his final chapter of admonitions to pastors he speaks to them about the sensitive moment just after preaching a fine sermon: “When a sermon is delivered with due propriety and with a fruitful message, the mind of the speaker is exalted by joy all his own over his performance, . . . he must not disregard his own [spiritual] health and develop tumours of pride.”⁵ The ancient and medieval theo-

⁵Gregory the Great, *Pastoral Care*, trans. Henry Davis (New York: Newman Press, 1955), p. 234.





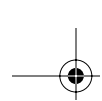
logians who sought to categorize mankind's major lapses constantly named pride as one of the seven deadly sins, and many spiritual leaders have defined pride as the root sin from which all other sins sprang. Thomas Aquinas, for example, spoke of pride as "contempt of God" out-matching all other sins in turning away from God.⁶ It is likely that much of our difficulty in obeying God's command to love him with our whole being and our neighbors as ourselves is rooted in the sin of pride: we want self to look good, especially to ourselves, and so we concentrate on serving ourselves, thus putting ourselves first, ahead of other people, even ahead of God. Pride has evil effects on the lives of others and pride brings pharisaic hypocrisy, the self-deception of self-righteousness, into our relationship with God. To combat the great evil of pride, we have to learn humility, and God regularly checks up on us on how we are doing at this point.

What then is humility? It is honest realism and realistic honesty. Whereas pride is all parading, play-acting and pretending, humility is rooted in facing facts. What facts? The fact of our smallness and sinfulness before God; the fact of our weakness and inability to shape and control the future, whether our own or anyone else's, just because we are all in the hands of a sovereign God; the fact of our stupidity and silliness that lurks behind every pose of being smart and savvy that our pride prompts us to adopt; the fact of our inborn fascination with ourselves and constant concentration on being happy, fulfilled, and a success; the fact of being habitually self-conscious, concerned about what others think of us, when we ought to be God conscious in a way that takes us beyond ourselves. Facing these facts cuts us down to size, and humility grows out of being thus cut down.

Genuine humility is not only Godward in direction, it also colors all relationships with other humans. To detect whether it is growing in us we

⁶Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologiae* 44 (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963), p. 139.



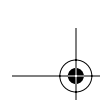


can prayerfully invite God's help in self-examination as we ask ourselves such questions as: Am I able to joyfully perform tasks in my church that have little or no visibility? Do I regularly credit others for their labor? Can I value and enjoy people who are not normally considered respectable? Are my thoughts toward the difficult people in my life infused with grace? Do I give my spouse first choice of TV channel, room temperature or vacation? Are my prayers usually on behalf of other people? Is it relatively easy for me to give my time or my money—and tell no one about it? Do I see every opportunity not as an earned right but as a gift from God? Do I cut short thoughts of comparing myself favorably with others? Do I honor others with my thoughts, words and actions? To the extent that we can honestly say yes to questions like these, we are beginning to learn humility toward others—and so to conquer the sin of pride. It will help us to note that both pride and humility begin in the heart and in the mind. Pride is not at the outset a sin of action, nor is humility a virtue of action, which is why we often deceive ourselves about their presence within. Pride and humility are attitudes of heart that find expression in action, and actions of true humility toward others grow from a heart that is already humbled before God.

Humility cannot be fully detected or measured by direct inspection, for trying to inspect our own humility is itself a yielding to pride (which is why it was so grotesque when a listener said after a talk: "I'm so glad you spoke on humility; that's my strong point, you know!"). The most we can ever do is concentrate on negating and mortifying the various expressions of pride we are already aware of, and on asking our Lord to show us what more negating and mortifying needs to be done. That is a request that the God who watches us even as he watches over us, and who maintains his perfect knowledge of us in all matters where we do not truly know ourselves (that means, in every matter without exception all our lives!) is fully equipped to answer.

God checks up on us in the matter of wisdom. The compiler of Proverbs tells us:



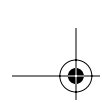


Blessed is the one who finds wisdom,
and the one who gets understanding,
for the gain from her is better than gain from silver
and her profit better than gold. (Prov 3:13)

We are all much more inclined to foolishness than we know, and God constantly has to be peeling off of us layer after layer of supposed wisdom so that we may face the reality of our foolishness and then find out from him what real wisdom really amounts to. Only then will we be able to reckon with him and with the consequences of what we say and do in the way that Christians should.

What does the Bible mean by wisdom? How does God teach us to think of it? Wisdom in the Bible is essentially a matter of knowing the way through life: knowing what to aim at and how to get there, knowing what life itself is like and how to cope with it. First and foremost, wisdom is a matter of knowing what God is like and how to relate to him: wisdom is rooted, we are told, in the “fear” of the Lord (Ps 111:10; Prov 1:7; Job 28:28), that is, in the reverence that recognizes God’s hand in all things, that responds to all of his teaching in his Word and that relies on his faithfulness in all situations, even the darkest of them. And then, within that frame, wisdom is a matter of knowing what people are like and how to deal with them and shape relationships with them most prudently. Wisdom is a gift from God that is found through being sought; those who think they have it already and those who are not interested in acquiring it (sadly, there are such, including some Christians) do not seek it from God by the appropriate means (learning it from Bible writers and Bible characters who embody it), and thus they fail to find it. “If any of you lacks wisdom,” says James, the classic New Testament wisdom writer, “let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.” (Jas 1:5). Do we do this? We pray *with* wisdom when we pray *for* wisdom to see what hopes, expectations, petitions to God and plans for ourselves and others wisdom now suggests. Is that the perspective of



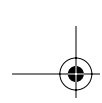


our praying? It should be; it needs to be. Wisdom forms strategies, calculates consequences, channels passion, sustains sobriety, discerns and avoids foolishness, and cherishes peace and harmony at all times. Without wisdom there is no God-pleasing life. We may be sure that as God checks up on us, Christlike, Holy Spirit wisdom is one of the things he looks for and rejoices to see.

Summarizing the thrust of what we have surveyed, then, we may now say that *God checks up on our focus*: how far our faith, repentance, love, humility and wisdom, such as they are, have combined to make us clear-sighted about our goal in life, and the priorities that it imposes. God wants us, in other words, to discern whether we've got life together or whether, as yet, we haven't. There is an old fable that tells of a donkey who saw good oats in two opposite corners of a field and could never make up his mind which corner to go to. So there he stood in one spot, half-way between the corners, until he starved to death. Often we are too much like that donkey. We are torn apart by alternative options and desires, and we seem not to have what it takes to decide between the options. God checks up on us at that point. Are we sufficiently integrated in Christ to know how to make those decisions? Are we clearheaded enough in Christ to determine our own priorities, both overall and in making particular choices? Have we got our life into proper focus? Will we be ready to cope with death when it comes?

We find a good model of a Christian who had got his life together in the apostle Paul, who wrote, "One thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil 3:13-14). Of course, from one standpoint, even in prison, let alone at other times, Paul was multitasking: doing 50, 60, 100, 120 different things every day. So are you, so are we, so is everyone. But Paul was able to say "One thing I do" because he had got it all together. Each specific thing he did was integrated into the one Christ-centered thing he was doing all the time.

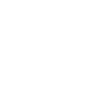
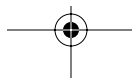


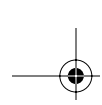


Paul was following up in practice his own inference of the Christian's priority that he draws from the Christian's identity. "If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is. . . . Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth" (Col 3:1-2). He was enjoying what he prayed that the Colossians might also enjoy—"knowledge of [God's] will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord" (Col 1:9-10). Paul knew what was most important and how all of those 101 other tasks and actions fit under the one most important goal. God checks on us to see whether we are like Paul and like Paul's Master, because this single-mindedness is what we also see, and see supremely, in the Lord Jesus. Thus the divine physician probes us, and his probing goes on all the time.

GOD THE SEARCHER

We have been exploring aspects of our life that our omniscient God, who knows us through and through, always has his eye on, and it is very good for us to remind ourselves and be made sensitive about them. But the exploration has for the moment taken us out of the personal checkup situation that we began thinking about, and we need now to get back to it. The thesis we put forward was that we need spiritual checkups for spiritual health just as we need physical checkups for bodily health. It follows from this that as wise persons will initiate each physical checkup by making an appointment with their physician, and just as they will then look to their physician to tell them what he or she has discovered and advise them accordingly, so, if we are wise Christians, we will initiate regular spiritual checkups by asking our God to survey us thoroughly and tell us what we should do and be willing to let him do in relation to whatever negative things he may find. Granted, praying is the topic of this book, and it is not a general treatise on the Christian life, but any weakness of faith, any neglect of repentance or, actually, refusal to repent of and forsake particular bad habits and paths of sin, any cherishing of

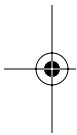


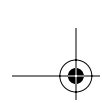


unloving and unhumiliated attitudes, and any failure of focus—any lack of clearheaded wholeheartedness, that is—in our personal discipleship to the Lord Jesus, will constantly drain the life out of our praying. So as we explore the theme of requesting and receiving God's checkup, we must cast our net wide and ask him to tell us of anything—yes, anything—that he sees in us that is draining life, energy and joy out of our communion with him. This seems to follow from the nature of the case, and the Bible hammers it home anyway by setting before us a prayer psalm (a model prayer, that is there for us to use) in which the psalmist works up from his celebration of God's closeness and awesomeness to doing precisely what we have said. This is Psalm 139.

Here we have one of the many psalms in which the psalmist speaks in the first person singular. This kind of psalm is meant to be read in a very personal way. The *I* of the psalm is both an individual and an inclusive *I*. It is I, the psalmist, and I, each reader and reciter of the psalm. Every single person who hears or reads this kind of psalm is individualized by it, for God asks us all, personally and directly, every time: Is this your prayer? These psalms are models of praise and prayer for us to enter into, and we can only enter into them one person at a time. Since Psalm 139 is a personal prayer addressed to God, its full import is best absorbed by reading it aloud, so that it is both read and heard simultaneously. We now invite the reader to do just that, and to this end the entire psalm (six stanzas, the fourth, fifth and sixth shorter than the first three) is reproduced below. Please make it your own prayer as you speak the words.

O LORD, you have searched me and known me!
 You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
 you discern my thoughts from afar.
 You search my path and my lying down
 and are acquainted with all my ways.
 Even before a word is on my tongue,
 behold, O, LORD, you know it altogether.





Prayer Checkup

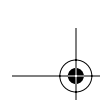
You hem me in, behind and before,
 and lay your hand upon me.
 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
 it is high; I cannot attain it.

Where shall I go from your Spirit?
 Or where shall I flee from your presence?
 If I ascend to heaven you are there!
 If I make my bed in Sheol you are there!
 If I take the wings of the morning
 and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
 even there your hand shall lead me,
 and your right hand shall hold me.
 If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
 and the light about me be night,"
 even the darkness is not dark to you;
 the night is as bright as the day,
 for darkness is as light with you.

For you formed my inward parts;
 you knitted me together in my mother's womb.
 I praise you for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
 Wonderful are your works;
 my soul knows it very well.
 My frame was not hidden from you,
 when I was being made in secret,
 intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
 Your eyes saw my unformed substance;
 in your book were written, every one of them,
 the days that were formed for me,
 when as yet there were none of them.

How precious to me are your thoughts, O God!
 How vast is the sum of them!
 If I would count them, they are more than the sand.





I awake, and I am still with you.

Oh that you would slay the wicked, O God!

O, men of blood, depart from me!

They speak against you with malicious intent;

your enemies take your name in vain.

Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD?

And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?

I hate them with complete hatred;

I count them my enemies.

Search me, O God, and know my heart!

Try me and know my thoughts!

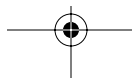
And see if there be any grievous way in me,

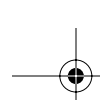
and lead me in the way everlasting!



If you have just now prayed aloud this psalm to God, you will have appreciated and entered into its great emotional honesty and intensity and transparency. You will have recognized that this prayer psalm is on the borderline between what the previous chapter called brooding (thinking about God in God's presence) and what in the ordinary sense we call prayer (talking directly to God about himself and oneself, and about life). The psalmist takes us to and fro over that borderline, and so in fact will all honest prayers of self-examination and worship.

In the first three stanzas we find ourselves practicing God's presence and admiring God's greatness. What we are admiring in stanza one is God's omniscience, and here the key words are *you know*. "Oh, Lord, you have . . . *known* me! / You *know* when I sit down and rise up" (vv. 1-2). "Before a word is on my tongue, / O LORD, . . . you *know* it altogether" (v. 4). "Such *knowledge* is too wonderful for me; / . . . I cannot attain it" (v. 6). But you, Lord, have it. You know me through and through. This is breathtaking! At one time or another, nearly everyone has wished to read the thoughts of someone else, but of course, we cannot do so, and maybe that is a good thing. Certainly there are moments when we have





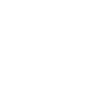
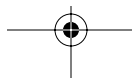
reason to be grateful that no other person can read our own minds—except God! Even that may feel a little unnerving. That the God who knows every square inch of the faintest star in the universe, who understands the most complex philosophy (both its flaws and its wisdom) and who counts the exact number of hairs on our heads also reads our thoughts and desires, our motives, our dreams, might make us uneasy—yet to believers it brings enormous comfort. God *knows* us—in the most thorough sense of that word—and whatever weird and unworthy things he finds inside us, he loves us still.

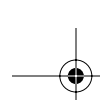
In stanza two, the psalmist celebrates God’s omnipresence and here the key words are *you are there*. Where? Everywhere. “If I ascend to heaven, you are *there!* / If I make my bed in Sheol, you are *there!* If I take the wings of the morning / and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, / even *there* your hand will lead me, / and your right hand shall hold me” (vv. 8-10). We can never get away from God’s presence, never escape it or shake free of it; we are never outside of his upholding hand. That’s the omnipresence of God. In the words of C. S. Lewis, “We may ignore, but we can nowhere evade, the presence of God. The world is crowded with him. He walks everywhere *incognito*. And the *incognito* is not always hard to penetrate. The real labor is to remember, to attend . . . in fact to come awake. Still more, to remain awake.”⁷

Just as with his omniscience, God’s omnipresence too can bring either unease or comfort. Fleeing from God is futile—as the prophet Jonah so drastically discovered. How we, as the people of God, respond to his divine omnipresence depends in part on our spiritual health. If we are uneasy in welcoming God’s constant presence, maybe this reveals a spiritual sickness, some cherished private perversity perhaps, for which we need to invite God’s forgiveness and healing. The prayer of Psalm 139 shows us how to do that.

Stanza three of Psalm 139 (vv. 13-16) speaks of the omnipotence of

⁷C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1964), pp. 100-101.



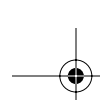


God, which accompanies his omniscience and omnipresence. Here the key phrase is *you formed*. Fiat creation, purposive design and artistic craftsmanship are all brought together in that verb. God by his power formed me, my circumstances, my hours, my days, everything about me and everything about everybody else as well. “You *formed* my inward parts,” says verse 13; “Your eye saw my *unformed* substance,” says verse 16. Here we are being told that long before the technology of ultrasound, whereby we can see embryos in the womb and admire a thumb, a nose, a toe, as it grows there, God could see that baby being formed, God knew him or her, God was actually shaping stomach and heart and hair and fingernails and personality. God knew us, each one, even when our own mother knew only a swelling in her belly and a fluttering movement that set her imagining who might be growing inside.

God’s power, blended with his knowledge, has sobering implications. “In your book were written, every one of them, / the days that were *formed* for me, / when as yet there were none of them” (v. 16). I (Carolyn) remember well the day when I sat down and calculated the days that my own firstborn child had lived: a mere 8,175 days until a car crash on the way to work ended Sheri’s life as well as that of her own unborn child. At age seven, Sheri had completed nearly a third of her lifetime—and God knew. He had counted the days. When Sheri danced at her senior prom, she had completed more than three quarters of it—and God knew. He had counted the days. At college graduation, she had completed all but seventy-one days. God had already counted them. I am grateful that those counted days were in God’s knowledge, not mine. It is comforting to know that the length of Sheri’s life did not somehow escape the knowledge and the power of God, that her life (far too short by human measure), continues to this day in his presence. God the Creator shapes—conceives, constructs, connects, controls—all that he brings into any mode of being, and this shaping is his omnipotence in action.

Having surveyed the greatness of God, the psalmist next puts himself into mental review for stanza four and says understandably, as he looks



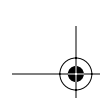


back at what he has surveyed, “How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! / How vast is the sum of them! / If I would count them, they are more than the sand” (vv. 17-18). It is possible to count sand (or of course, sheep) in an attempt to fall asleep. God’s thoughts, because they are beyond number, might be even more soporific. Perhaps the psalmist really did put himself to sleep by trying to focus and count them. But he wakes up, and, joy of joys, he can say with the startled comprehension of any newlywed, “I awake, and I am still with you” (v. 18).

Now suddenly there is a shift in this prayer psalm, such a startling shift that in public reading the next paragraph is often omitted. It seems to break completely with the comforting joyful tone of the psalm so far. It speaks of hatred and killing—and it is directed at the enemies of God. Stanza five (vv. 19-22) shows the psalmist moving from admiring God to desiring peace with justice in the world. “Oh that you would slay the wicked, O God! . . . / your enemies who take your name in vain!” (vv. 19-20). What is going on here? Bear in mind, first, the uninhibited intensity of this psalm: if Jonathan Edwards merited the description of being a God-intoxicated man, much more does this psalmist. We spoke of his intensity before and hope that our readers are by now entering into it. In moments of great intensity the human mind may jump abruptly from one thing to another, as surely your own experience has shown you, and that is what we see happening here, without any reduction of intensity in the way the new thought is expressed. Second, bear in mind that the psalmists, like the prophets, long with a huge aching passion (of which, alas, we today know very little) to see God, their God, the rightful Lord of all, triumph over all the anti-God forces that surround them and dishonor him. God has enemies!—“men of blood” who, because they are totally against him, are indiscriminately hostile to all who in any measure are aligned on his side. The psalmist voices his personal abhorrence of God’s and his enemies as a class in the way that we ourselves might execrate today’s urban terrorists and suicide bombers.

Christians, however, taking the words of these verses on their lips,





and similar words from other psalms, should direct them against the devil and his demons, “the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph 6:12), against which spiritual warfare must go on without end. (We can never hate the devil too much!) The prescribed path for Christ’s disciples, however, is always to ask God to bless *persons* opposing us (Mt 5:44; Lk 6:27-28, 33-34; Acts 7:60), and our imperfectly sanctified hearts are not pure enough to pray for God to vindicate himself against his human foes without personal animosities invading and corrupting our motives. The purifying of the heart, however, is the next reality of which the psalmist speaks.

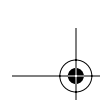
SEARCH ME, O GOD

And so we come to stanza six (vv. 23-24). “Search me, O God, and know my heart! / Try me and know my thoughts!” That is said against the background of what is recognized in the first verse: “O LORD, you have searched me and known me!” But now the psalmist prays that out of the searching, which God is actually doing all the time in him as in every other person, God will let him see any shortcoming that God himself sees. In other words, having celebrated God’s greatness and goodness as his sovereign Maker, permanent environment, and constant x-ray monitor, he now turns to God for his checkup. He wants it to be thorough, and because he knows so well who and what God is, he expects it to be thorough. And he is ready if need be, for the knife.

Search me, O God, and know my heart!
 Try me and know my thoughts!
 And see if there be any grievous way in me.
 and lead me in the way everlasting!

He is saying to God: If you see anything wrong, tell me so that I may put it behind me. Thus you will “lead me in the way everlasting.” It is only as we see the power of the vision of God in his greatness and glory in the first eighteen verses of Psalm 139 that we can appreciate the force





of the prayer “Search me, O God.”

There is a hymn that spells out in detail the significance of that final prayer. It is a poignant plea for the gift of spiritual honesty through having God tell us what he sees in us when he searches us.

Search me, O God! My actions try,
And let my life appear
As seen by thine all searching eye—
To mine, my ways make clear.

Search all my sense, and know my heart,
Who only canst make known;
And let the deep, the hidden part
To me be fully shown.

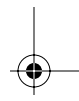
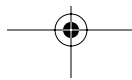
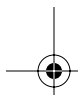
Throw light into the darkened cells,
Where passion reigns within;
Quicken my conscience till it feels
The loathsomeness of sin.

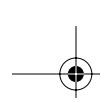
Search, till thy fiery glance has cast
Its holy light through all,
And I by grace am brought at last
Before thy face to fall.

Thus prostrate I shall learn of thee,
What now I feebly prove,
That God alone in Christ can be
Unutterable love!⁸

This hymn fleshes out for us some part, at least, of the desiring in Psalm 139:23-24 that grows out of the admiring in its verses 1-18. The psalmist is a very genuine believer; he has a heart for God; he would surely say what Psalm 73:25-26 says—“Whom have I in heaven but you? / And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. . . . / God

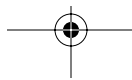
⁸Francis Bottome, “Search Me, O God” (1823).

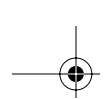




is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.” He wants closeness to God more than he wants anything else in the world, as, deep down, all regenerate persons do. In verses 1-18 he has been brooding, with joy as great as his wonder and admiration, on how close his God (Yahweh, the Lord, God-in-covenant, v. 1) actually is to him at all times. Now he begs for his checkup, to ensure that nothing in him will get in the way of him being close to God at all times. The two-way street of fellowship with God is what this psalm is basically about, and the full-scale checkup is now being sought in order to deepen that fellowship. God’s searching of the heart, the psalmist knows, besides any matter for renewed repentance that it may uncover, will operate as a spiritual tonic, toning him up in two particular qualities that mark all men and women of God: *emptiness* (because God is constantly emptying us of ourselves so that he may fill us with himself) and *eagerness* (because eagerness for more of God is the measure of what you have of God already: the more you have, the more you want). The eager desire with which the psalm closes, “lead me in the way everlasting,” can never be too passionate, too zealous, too intense; some things can be overdone, but not this. We should constantly be praying with all our heart, from the depths of our being, “Lord, at all costs, whatever it takes, in your love and faithfulness and wisdom, lead me in the way everlasting—keep me running, as fast as I can—get me safely home.” The psalmist’s great longing should be ours too.

How does God search us? It is a two-tone affair. On the one hand, he applies Bible teaching on standards and ideals for godly living to our consciences, judging us, to start with, regarding the realities we discussed—faith, repentance, love, humility, focus—and going on from there. He does this by prompting us through the indwelling Holy Spirit actually to judge ourselves. The General Confession of the historic Anglican Prayer Book states what we always find: “We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against thy holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought





to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done, and there is no health in us.” Then, on the other hand, God the Spirit forms questions in our minds that we have to answer, questions about goals, motives and attitudes, and what really goes on in our heart’s secret places.

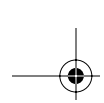
As those in the various counseling professions know well, questioning the motives and exposing the inward reasons for actions taken or not taken is a direct means of getting people to face themselves, become more realistic about themselves, and reprogram themselves as necessary, and that is God’s way with us too. *Search* implies all of this. T. S. Eliot was right to say that we humans cannot bear much reality, but each time God searches us he will confront us with as much reality as we can handle at that moment in order to change us for the better, according to his purpose of totally remaking us in the image of our Lord Jesus Christ. In this he is (let us never forget) both loving and wise, and both qualities are in action when his search is on.

As we let God thus work us over, examining ourselves in the knowledge that hereby he is examining us, the requested salutary searching and exposure of wicked ways (all ways that are less than the best come under that heading) actually takes place. It is by these means that the checkup is effected. How often should we ask for it? Once a year may be often enough for a medical checkup, but once a week at a preset time (the Puritans opted for Saturday night), is a good routine for God’s checkup of our behavior and our heart. Experience—the experience of Catholic, Orthodox and evangelical saints, past and present—has decided.

MISTAKEN IDENTITY

Should we expect that after such a checkup, praying will become easy? No. Though prayer will then, we may hope, be more honest and go deeper, *easy* is never the word that fits real praying (as distinct, be it said, from unconsidered burbling or mechanical recitation in God’s presence).





We are here up against one of the realities of spiritual life that we do not always recognize, namely, that there is a great deal of make-believe about us. Again and again we think that we are being honest with ourselves and with God when, in fact, make-believe is as far as we've got. Almost four centuries ago Francis DeSales, a Catholic pioneer in teaching the path of prayer, laid it down that the first step in meditation and praying is "to place oneself in the presence of God." But that's easier said than done, because our make-believe gets in the way.

C. S. Lewis points out this problem, which was his no less than it is ours. We all have superficial and inadequate ideas about ourselves, often amounting to real self-deception. We have mistaken imaginations of ourselves. We carry around a public identity that becomes a mask hiding us from ourselves, and it is beyond us to remove that mask. So, left to ourselves, we are hidden from ourselves, and we need God to unmask us to ourselves just as we need God to unveil himself to us in revelation and to open our spiritual eyes to see his glory. So whenever we try to pray, we must look to the Spirit of God to strip away our fantasies and delusions and enable each of us to put the real *me* in the presence of the real God. "In prayer," writes Lewis, "this real I struggles to speak, for once, from his real being. . . . The prayer preceding all prayers is 'May it be the real I who speaks. May it be the real Thou that I speak to.' . . . Only God himself can let the bucket down to the depths in us. And, on the other side, he must constantly work as the iconoclast. Every idea of him we form, he must in mercy shatter."⁹ And many of our ideas about ourselves have to be shattered too. It thus appears that only through the help of the Holy Spirit can we ever achieve reality in our prayers.

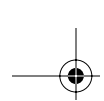
About this, however, P. T. Forsyth gives us good direction to start us on the track.

Go into your chamber, shut the door, and cultivate the habit of praying audibly. Write prayers and burn them. Formulate yourself. Read a



⁹Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm*, pp. 81-82.



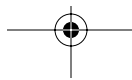


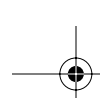
passage of Scripture and then sit down and turn it into a prayer, written or spoken. Learn to be particular, specific and detailed in your prayer so long as you are not trivial. General prayers, literary prayers and stately prayers are, for private prayer, traps and sops to the soul. To formulate your soul is the best means to escape formalizing it. This is the best, the wholesome kind of self-examination through which God puts us. We find ourselves, we come to ourselves in the Spirit. So face your special weaknesses and sins before God. Force yourself to say to God exactly where you are wrong. When anything goes wrong, don't ask to have it set right without asking in prayer what it was in you that made it go wrong, and ask that that be put right also. Let prayer be concrete, factual, a direct result of life's real experiences.¹⁰

Without the Spirit of God, this realism and the reality to which it leads will not happen. Forsyth wrote these words in 1916, nearly a century ago, but they are as timely today as when he first put them on paper and will continue so as long as the world lasts.

Again we ask, as we close this chapter: what, in positive terms, is the relevance of all of this to our actual daily praying? In a word, it helps us to pray healthily, by keeping us in good shape in God's sight. Spiritual health means being alert and energetic for works of love and obedience; the alternative is degenerating into insensitivity and sluggishness, a life of slackness and drift. Years of avoiding visits to the dentist will leave your teeth in a mess, and a constant evading of God's checkups will have the same decaying effect on your soul. Omitting medical checkups may mean that much goes wrong inside you unnoticed, and omitting God's checkups may let the equivalent of tumors, cysts and polyps grow unnoticed all over your inner self. Our praying is the index of our spiritual life quality; the dictum credited to Murray McCheyne is right: "What a man is alone on his knees before God, that he is, and no more." Our lack of love for praying may be an indication of all-round spiritual debility.

¹⁰P. T. Forsyth, *The Soul of Prayer* (1916; reprint, Vancouver, B.C.: Regent College Publishing, 1995), pp. 53-54.





Maybe we need to go to God for a major checkup straightaway in order to find out.

We can't say any more than that because from this point on each of our own stories and each of our reader's stories will be different. We are all different people; we are all in different places, with different problems. And the effect of divine searching and the changes that God will require us to make are distinctive to each of us. Whenever we read Scripture, meditate on it and seek to pray on the basis of what we read, "Lord, lead me in the way everlasting," we may properly say to God, "Lord, you are searching me even now; what are you seeing? Show me if there be any wicked way in me." That request ought to be a normal part of our praying, a regular invitation to God to examine our inner being, the part that no one else sees. What happens after that is between the Lord and each of us individually.

Here, then, is God's way of leading us all into the spiritual health of a lively faith, lively obedience and lively prayer. May we not hesitate to go along with him in this.

