

The Work Of The Holy Spirit In Psalm 51

Discipleship Course

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Unless otherwise noted, all scripture verses were taken from the New King James Version, copyrighted 1992 by Thomas Nelson, Inc.

Psalm 51 is the account of King David who thought he got away with adultery and murder and figured no one would catch him or know about it. That's what happened until God, who is omniscient, reveals David's sin to a prophet and was told to confront him. Like many human beings once confronted about what they had done wrong, David needed to deal with the situation. In his dealings, there was great torment within his soul. As he sought God for forgiveness, David recognized: the problem, which was the sins he committed; the need of God's forgiveness; and the solution of God's graciousness to him.

The purpose of this study explores what King David needed to do in order to experience joy and how the Holy Spirit impacted his life during this time. This psalm (Psalm 51) has a story that is found in 2 Samuel chapters 11-12. It is when David had committed adultery and murder that Nathan the prophet confronts him about these grave sins. It is here in this Psalm where David is dealing with forgiveness in his life.

The key concept in Psalm 51 is that we see the problems, the needs, and the solutions for David's life. The problems in his life that are mentioned were rebellion, waywardness, and failure. The needs were to ask God to wipe away, wash, and purify David of these problems or the sin. The solution was for God to be gracious, demonstrate faithfulness, and to show abundant mercies toward David. The overall solution is for someone and not something to work in David's life. The holiness of God was hallowed and there was a deep contrition of past sins whereas David then experienced the holiness of God's Spirit.

David experienced God in a different way than he possibly did before. There is no doubt that this was a moment of holiness when in the presence of God, David asked God to create in him a clean heart that holiness began. This is something that only God could do. There are five aspects that David wanted God to change in his life as he was given a new heart. These five aspects are: a pure heart, steadfast spirit, empowered life, joyful heart, and a submissive will. David's life was changed from the heaviness of sin, to a deep confession, to living a life that was filled with joy, and that he wanted everyone to know of God's redeeming grace and power.

One of the mysteries is David experiencing the Holy Spirit's power on his life. The question needs to be asked, why did David use the name "Holy Spirit" in Psalm 51? At times, limits and boundaries are placed on what God does or allows to happen. Sin is often viewed as a negative when compared to the final result or outcome that it can bring to a person. The result of the sin and repentance that David experienced helped make him a better individual; to make him truly a "man after God's own heart."

This study is also an in-depth research of the revelation of what the Holy Spirit is able to do in the life of a person. What does it really mean to become broken to the point where there is a deep repentance of sin? Repentance leads to confession, confession brings a person to experience God and life with a new outlook.

One concern is that scholars have skimmed over these verses and have not addressed the subject of the Holy Spirit and His operation in this passage and others throughout the Old Testament. Marvin E. Tate even points out in his writings that scholars believe it is quite

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possible that this psalm was used primarily in a ritual of repentance and healing for a sick person and was designed for recitation in a private sickroom, aided perhaps by a priest.¹

The power of the Holy Spirit has been evident in scriptures. Even in times of failure that resulted from sin, God through his Spirit has brought conviction, repentance, empowerment, and holiness to all who call upon His name. Looking at the meaning of the Hebrew and Greek words for Holy Spirit helps to understand what the Spirit of God can accomplish. The depth of the Holy Spirit's work can be seen in various individuals in both the Old and New Testaments.

Down through the ages, mankind has faced many spiritual needs and found the psalms to be of great comfort, strength, and guidance. A great example of this can be seen in studying Psalm 51, which deals with a prayer for the forgiveness of sin, for mercy, and for the unmerited favor from God. There is no word of the forgiveness after David confessed it; this Psalm must be understood as a full meditation on the importance of confession. David lamented over that sin before it had slain him and made him like a dead man, wanting his spirit or heart quickened by God. He also fears that the Lord will cast him as a dead and abominable thing out of His presence, just as the dead are despised by the living. Studies from scripture indicate this is one of the just punishments of sin; it procures the casting out of a man from the face of God. As mankind enjoys the pleasures of sin, he is depriving himself of the Creator of the universe; as David, for the carnal love of the face of Bathsheba, puts himself in danger to be cast out forever from the presence of the Lord his God.

The whole message of this psalm is that the vilest offender among God's people can appeal to God for forgiveness, for moral restoration, and for the resumption of a joyful life of fellowship and service if he comes with a broken spirit and bases his appeal on God's compassion and grace.

The Use of the Name Holy Spirit in the Scriptures

Old Testament

In the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit is referenced or referred to as "Spirit" or the "Spirit of God." There are several verses that deal with "familiar spirits" and "man's spirit" throughout the Old Testament. The word or name "spirit" referring to the "*rûach*" of God is used about 230 times. However, only two times is there reference to the "Holy Spirit" in the Old Testament. The first is found in Psalm 51:11 where David prays to God, "do not take Your Holy Spirit from me" after David was confronted concerning his sin of adultery and murder. The second is found in Isaiah 63:10,11 where the prophet Isaiah looks back on what God had done for Israel. He praises God for His loving-kindness and goodness and for the pity and love bestowed upon Israel. God identified with their sufferings as He does with people today. The Jews asked, "Where is our God who did wonders for His people? Why is He not working on our behalf?" The prophet Isaiah pleads with God for a demonstration of His power as He did in the days of Moses.

¹ Marvin E. Tate, *Word Biblical Commentary*, Vol. 20 (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, Publisher, 1990), 11.

New Testament

The New Testament has much to say about the Spirit in relation to God. Like “*rûach*” in the Old Testament, “*pneuma*” in the New Testament simply denotes “wind” or “breath.” John’s gospel points out that God Himself is spirit (John 4:23), as well as the writer of Hebrews mentioning He is the Father of spirits (Hebrews 12:9). From God alone proceeds the inspiration and revelation of the prophecies (Revelation 22:6). Christ, the second Adam, became a life-giving spirit; the first Adam was a living soul (1 Corinthians 15:45). As God’s Son, Christ participates in the life of the Father and has life in himself by His nature (John 1:1-4; 5:26). Christ even calls himself “the life” (John 11: 25; 14:6). The life that is to be found in Christ is revealed in the Scriptures and becomes a reality to everyone believing in His name (1 John 5:11-13).²

God the Father has given Christ a life-giving spirit so that He who has life in Himself is also able to give life to those who are dead in their sins. The Spirit of Christ is therefore called the Spirit of life (Romans 8:2). The believer that is “in Christ” is a new creation and has eternal life in heaven. That eternal life within the believer flows as long as his/her faith is maintained in Him, just as the branch never has life independent but must abide in living contact with the vine (John 15:16).

In the New Testament, the Greek word “*pneuma*” speaks of the Holy Spirit more than 250 times. “The Spirit” in the absolute sense occurs about 90 times and also refers to the Third Person of the Trinity. In John 6:63, the Spirit’s nature is expressed in the word “to make alive.” This is an Old Testament expression of the Spirit as the principle of life itself. The Spirit gives life to everything that is alive. Everyone and everything depends upon the renewing power of the Spirit for existence. All existence would slip back into a state of death if God were to withdraw His Spirit.

Isaiah’s Understanding of the Name, Holy Spirit

Before looking at Psalm 51 in detail, it would be helpful to take a brief look at Isaiah 63:10, 11 to see if there are some characteristics with which to compare the two passages. Isaiah was the only other writer in the Old Testament who refers to or uses the term Holy Spirit. The prophet, in writing in the sixty-third chapter, recalls God’s blessings on Israel in its past history, especially at the Exodus. He begs the Lord to come once more to the aid of his people, who now humbly confess their sins. God showed his loving-kindness to his children all along. Isaiah describes God’s kindness or unfailing love as more in number than the grains of sand, to which this prophet is thankful and ascribes praise to the Lord for all that He has done. God does good because he is good; what he bestows upon us is according to his mercies (not according to our merits) and according to the multitude of his loving-kindnesses, which can never be

² *The New Testament Greek-English Dictionary, Pi-Rho*, 3665-4374, Vol. 15, 16 vols. (Springfield, Missouri: The Complete Biblical Library, 1986), 229.

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spent. Thus we should magnify God's goodness, and speak honorably of it, not only when we plead it (as David, Psalm 51:1), but when we praise it.³

Isaiah here takes particular notice of the steps of God's mercy to Israel ever since it was formed into a nation:

He was their God. The expectations God had concerning Israel was that they would conduct themselves well. When God brought Israel out of Egypt, he said, "Surely they are my people", and he entered into a covenant with them to be their God. They said more than once, "All that the Lord shall say unto us we will do and will be obedient"; and God took them to be His peculiar people. God dealt fairly and faithfully with them, and therefore expects they should deal so with Him. They are children of the covenant, and therefore it may be hoped that they will walk in the steps of faithfulness as their fathers walked.

He was their Savior. Out of the bondage of Egypt and all the calamities of Israel's wilderness wanderings, God had always been their Savior. What He did for them was to show forth the love and concern He has for His people in their affliction and He sympathizes with them; that is He takes what injury is done to them as done to Himself and will reckon for it accordingly. Their cries moved Him according to Exodus 3:7 ff. The Lord told Moses, "you can be sure I have seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard their cries for deliverance from their harsh slave drivers. Yes, I am aware of their suffering. So I have come to rescue them from the Egyptians and lead them out of Egypt into their own good and spacious land. It is a land flowing with milk and honey" (NIV). God appears for them as vigorously as if He were pained in their pain. This is also carried over into the New Testament when God said, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" This should be of great comfort to God's people in their affliction that, if they humble themselves under His hand, He is afflicted in their affliction, as parents would be when their own child is afflicted with a great sickness. God not only redeemed Israel out of their bondage, but he bore them and carried them and put up with them through forty years of wandering around in the wilderness. They were weak, but He supported them by His power, sustained them by His love. When they were burdened and ready to sink, He bore them up. In the wars they made upon the nations when they did enter the Promised Land, God stood by them.

He was gracious to them. Things looked very hopeful and promising. One would have thought that they should have continued dutiful as children to God, and then there was no doubt but He would have continued a gracious Father to them. The situation was that they were no longer interested in conducting themselves in a manner that was pleasing toward God. Isaiah said, "they rebelled against him and grieved his Holy Spirit" (NLT). They revolted from their allegiance to God and took up arms against Him. God justly withdrew His protection; and not only so, but made war upon them, as a king or prince justly does upon the rebels. He who had been so much their friend was turned to be their enemy and fought against them, by one judgment after another, both in the wilderness and after their settlement in Canaan.

The folly of sinners is they willfully lose Him for a friend who is the most desirable friend, and make Him their enemy who is the most formidable enemy. This refers especially to those calamities that were of late brought upon them by their captivity in Babylon for their idolatries

³ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and unabridged in one volume*, <http://bible.somd.com/henry/H19C051.shtml> (Hendrickson: Peabody, 1991).

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and other sins. That which is both the original and the great aggravation of their troubles was that God who was gracious turned to be their enemy.

He never changes. The people of Israel remembered the days of old, looked into their Bibles, read the story of God's bringing their fathers out of Egypt, considered it more closely than they ever did before. Where are all the wonders that our fathers told us? Where is He that brought them up out of Egypt? Is He not as able to bring us up out of Babylon? Where is the Lord God of Elijah? Where is the Lord God of our fathers?" This became an encouragement to them to repent and return to Him; their fathers were a provoking people and yet found Him a pardoning God; and why could they not find Him so if they return to Him? When the present days are dark and cloudy, it is good to remember the days of old, to recollect our own and others' experiences of the divine power and goodness and make use of them, to look back upon the years of the right hand of the Most High, and remember that He is God and changes not. God by His power brought them up from the depths of the earth; and it was a kind of resurrection to them; it was as life from the dead. He brought them safely to a place of rest. Many times in their march through the wilderness they had resting places provided for them by the direction of the Spirit of the Lord in Moses; and at length, they were made to rest finally in Canaan, and the Spirit of the Lord gave them that rest according to the promise. All this He did for them by His own power, for His own praise.

Understanding the terminology of the word "spirit" in Psalm 51

As already mentioned, there are many references to the "Spirit" or "Holy Spirit" used in the Old and New Testaments.

Rûach (Hebrew word). The Old Testament has a great deal to say about the "Spirit" (*rûach*) of God. The Hebrew word "*rûach*" denotes "wind, breath," or "spirit." In fact, the Spirit had an instrumental role in the history recorded in the Old Testament. By the Spirit, men and women were equipped as skilled workers, judges, leaders, kings, prophets, and servants of the Lord. Miracles, such as the dividing of the Jordan River as well as the interpretation of dreams, are traced back to the action of the Spirit (2 Kings 2:9f. [LXX 4 Kings 2:9f]; Genesis 41:38). However, the Spirit of God moved quickly and temporarily on men and women that were chosen by God to carry out a task. When the task was completed, the Spirit of God did not operate within an individual until they were chosen again to carry out another plan of God. Only a few, like David, had the Spirit dwelling in them continually (1 Samuel 16:13 [LXX 1 Kings 16:13]; Psalm 51:11 [LXX Psalm 50:11]; 2 Samuel 23:1,2 [LXX 2 Kings 23:1,2]).⁴

The prophets, however, prophesied of the new faith and obedience that the outpouring of the Spirit would bring in the future. For example, the prophet Jeremiah wrote:

"Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah - not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the

⁴ *The New Testament Greek-English Dictionary*, 228.

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Lord: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more." (Jeremiah 33:31-34 NKJV)

The prophets also saw the Spirit upon the Messiah, not only for the working of the miraculous, but also to demonstrate wisdom, understanding, counsel, power, knowledge, and fear of the Lord. Joel indicates that God's Spirit would be poured out "afterward" (Joel 2:28), indicating after the Messiah would come to redeem the world through His death on a cross to pay for the sins of mankind. Peter, under the inspiration of the Spirit, identified the "afterward" of Joel to mean "in the last days" (Acts 2:17), by which he meant the last age before the coming (millennial) age. Joel's prophecy uses a form of the Hebrew verb, which indicates the outpourings would be repeated until the time of judgment at the end of this age. Peter further saw that this meant times of refreshing can be ours throughout this age until Jesus comes again (Acts 3:19).⁵

The Old and New Testaments alike also have a great deal to say about the spirit of man. Some of the activities of man's spirit is that it inquires of the Lord, knows the Lord, prays to God, becomes troubled, and is stirred concerning both good and evil by the Spirit of God or Holy Spirit. Believers can serve God with their spirits, and with their spirits they can rejoice in God.

Holy Spirit. Only two passages in the Old Testament use the uppercase "Holy Spirit" (Psalm 51:11 and Isaiah 63:10,11). Most commentators relate this spirit to God, either as the person of the Holy Spirit or a power that he provides. When the two passages that capitalize "Holy Spirit" are looked at closely, it appears that a personal divine Spirit is what the writers had in mind because the loss of the Spirit means a loss of God's grace. David feared that his sin would incur the wrath of God, as happened to Saul from whom the Spirit was withdrawn. David fears not that a "person" would leave him as much as a power or a spiritual quality of holiness that is shown in other Scriptures to be a by-product of walking in the Spirit.⁶ When that happens, the inner being senses that they have no joy, life is filled with stains, and marked by sin and dirtiness. David then recognizes his own offense, guilt, and sin; it is in those times that it is hard to realize that we were meant for joy in this life. David was not going to let himself be burdened with emotional baggage or unresolved issues. In other words, he is not allowing his past to ruin his present. Recognizing that the chilling result of sin is separation from God, through repentance a person can then experience the presence of the Holy Spirit and of God's grace.⁷

When dealing with the Holy Spirit, it is also important to look at the Holiness of God. Holiness stands for His exalted, divine substance, and His majesty. Even the highest heavenly creature (the seraphim) do not look at the Holy God; rather, they cover themselves with their

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ W. Creighton Marlowe, "Spirit of Your Holiness in Psalm 51:13," *Trinity Journal* 19, no. 1, (Spring 1998), <http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.seuniversity.edu:2048/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rft&AN=ATLA0001002220&site=ehost-live> (accessed September 27, 2008).

⁷ Harriette Gille Robinet, "The clean heart create for me, O God," *U.S. Catholic* Vol. 62, no. 8, 37, <http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.seuniversity.edu:2048/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rft&AN=ATLA9707265151&site=ehost-live>, (accessed August 1997).

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wings and cry, "Holy, holy, holy" (Isaiah 6:2,3). The Holy God is a God of "light," and his holiness shines forth in His revelation of himself in glorious splendor (*kavodh* is the Hebrew word).

The holiness of God is made known in both judgment and salvation. It is depicted as a consuming fire in His manifestations of wrath. Throughout Israel's history when the people rebelled against God, God would disclose His holiness through His judgment of wrath. But the holiness is also evident when He redeems and rescues His fallen people. The same can be said of David; even in the midst of his fallen nature, God's judgment was manifested but he also redeemed him. David was still considered a man after God's own heart.

Free Spirit. In several Biblical translations, verse 12 uses the word "free" spirit. The word rendered "free" (*nadib*) in several passages means willing, voluntary, ready, prompt (1 Chronicles 28:21; Exodus 35:5). This word also means liberal, generous, noble-minded (Isaiah 32:5, 8; Proverbs 17:7, 26). It would seem here to mean "a willing spirit," referring to David's own mind or spirit. So the prayer is that God would uphold or sustain him in a state of mind in which he would be willing and ready to obey all the commands of God and to serve him faithfully. What he prayed for was grace and strength so that he would remain firm in keeping God's commands without wavering. It is a proper prayer that should be prayed by all that they may be always kept in a state of mind in which they will be willing to do all that God requires of them and to bear all that may be laid on them.

The Background of Psalm 51

Before looking at what David prayed for in his prayer of repentance, a question that should be answered is why did he pray this prayer? What was it that causes him to do so?

This biblical drama opens from the scriptural account in 2 Samuel chapters 11-12 as David, feeling pleasure at the news that his armies have defeated Ammon and Rabbah, strolls onto his rooftop balcony to enjoy an afternoon of sun. As he looks down from his rooftop, the beauty of a woman bathing erotically stirs him. Bathsheba is bathing in full view. Some have pointed the finger at Bathsheba, suggesting that she seduced David by bathing where the king was sure to notice her. This makes Bathsheba, not David, responsible for the king's inability to control his erotic urges. Even if Bathsheba behaved in a way to arouse the king's passions, King David is fully responsible for what he does. Despite her beauty, Bathsheba does not have the ability to cause the king to lose all sense of control and responsibility any more than Goliath had the ability to cause David to be afraid. David is now abusing his power, being a well-known public figure and a ruler of the nation. He is getting what he wants. Deceiving himself about the implications of his seduction on his life, Bathsheba's life, and the nation's life. David is blind to the long-term consequences that lay in wait for him.⁸ Even though he learns that she is married to one of his generals, he sends after her for sex, and then sends her home

⁸ Larry W. Spielman, "David's Abuse of Power." *Word & World* 19 (1999): 253, <http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.seuniversity.edu:2048/login.aspx?direct=true&db=oah&AN=OTA0000040157&site=ehost-live> (accessed October 3, 2008).

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again. David's little seduction produces more and bigger problems. Bathsheba is pregnant and sends word to the king.

David concocts a plan to free himself from the consequences of his indiscretion. He calls Bathsheba's husband Uriah home from the battle with the expectation that Uriah would have an intimate affair with his wife. Uriah would have then become the scapegoat for Bathsheba's pregnancy. To David's surprise, Uriah refuses to go home to his wife to sleep, saying that he cannot indulge himself in such pleasures while his men are left in the battlefield. He said, "The Ark and the armies of Israel and Judah are living in tents, and Joab and his officers are camping in the open fields. How could I go home to wine and dine and sleep with my wife? I swear that I will never be guilty of acting like that" (2 Samuel 11:11 NLT), so he slept outside on the cold hard ground, not at home with his wife.

David resorts to making him drunk, yet Uriah still resists the comfort of his wife's bed, sleeping instead with other officers bivouacked outside the palace. David panicked, which is a common reaction when saving face becomes the issue. Sin was still growing. He remembered the crafty way Saul had tried to kill him. He instructs Uriah to deliver a letter to his commanding officer, instructing the officer to place Uriah in the front lines where fighting is fiercest and let him be killed there. Uriah is doomed. In the battle, many innocent soldiers die needlessly, but David is pleased because Uriah is among those killed. On hearing the news of her husband's death, Bathsheba laments. After her period of mourning is over, David sends for her, and she becomes his wife. Their son is born and it appears as though David's cover-up, though terrible in price, will succeed.

Almost a year passed, during which time David covered his sins. However, he became weak and sick physically; he lost his joy; he lost his witness; he lost his power. God gave David plenty of time to make things right, but he persisted in hiding his sins. Had he come to the Lord on his own, in sincere repentance, things might have been different later on. While David did not have a Parliament, Congress, or a Supreme Court to hold him accountable, he did have the "close oversight" of God through the prophet Nathan. It is at this point that Nathan, the prophet and David's chief advisor, comes to chastise David. Nathan confronts the king indirectly, recounting the story of a wealthy man who, in order to feed a stranger, raids a poor man of his one treasured possession, a sheep, rather than use a sheep from his own abundant flock. David flies into a rage at hearing this story, declaring that the rich man should pay the poor man four times over. Further, David declares the rich man deserves to die because he lacked pity for his poor neighbor. Nathan did not soften the blow. Nathan responds to David's rage with the powerful indictment, "That man is you!" We must commend David for bowing to the authority of the Word of God and confessing his sin. He could have slain Nathan. David found a spiritual person who would see and name what he had done.

David's punishment, Nathan tells him, will be public calamity in his own family, and the death of the son born to Bathsheba. At this moment of awareness and calamity, the ascription implies, David brings his sins before God, struggles with his passions and the deep grief he feels, and composes Psalm 51.⁹

⁹ Barbara Ellison Rosenblit, "David, Bat Sheva, and the Fifty-First Psalm." *Cross Currents* 45, no. 3 (1995): 327, <http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.seuniversity.edu:2048/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rft&AN=ATLA0000902723&site=ehost-live> (accessed October 20, 2008).

God was ready to forgive David's sins, but He could not prevent those sins from "bringing forth death" (James 1:15). God's grace forgives, but God's government must allow sinners to reap what they sow. "He shall restore fourfold!" (2 Samuel 12:6) David had declared punishment concerning the man in Nathan's story, so God accepted his sentence. The sword never did depart from David's household: the baby died; Absalom killed Amnon, who had ruined Tamar (2 Samuel 13); then Joab killed Absalom (2 Samuel 18:9–17); and Adonijah was slain by Benaiah (1 Kings 2:24–25). Fourfold! Add to these trials the awful ruin of Tamar, the shameful treatment of David's wives by Absalom (2 Samuel 12:11; 16:20–23), plus the rebellion of Absalom, and you can see that David paid dearly for a few moments of lustful pleasure. He sowed lust and reaped the same; he sowed murder and reaped murders, for "whatever a man sows, that he will also reap" (Galatians 6:7). While we abhor David's sin and all the trouble it brought, we thank God for this wonderful verse of assurance to sorrowing parents who have lost children in death. As the late Evangelist Vance Havner said, "When you know where something is, you haven't lost it."

The Bible says, "Where sin abounds, grace much more abounds!" David prayed for God's grace, and in Psalm 51 David says to God, "create in me a clean heart, O God." The word "create" is very important. It means 'make', but only if God is the maker! The Bible starts by saying "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1). Only God could do it. And only God can make a new heart for a person. A new heart really means a new person altogether. Here there is no idea of washing the old heart and trying to remove the contamination of sin. Sin not only can be manifested as it comes out in your life, but it can be coiled tightly around your heart. The Psalmist is praying for a radical change in who he is. Paul wrote in his Second Letter to the Corinthians: "If anyone is in Christ he or she is a new person" (2 Corinthians 5:17). "In Christ" means a Christian. A new person here is a person that God has created again or made a new creature. David wrote Psalm 51 a thousand years before Paul wrote Corinthians. Christians understand what David wrote after they have read what Paul wrote. This means that we do not read it as Jews, but as Christians; and Christians are born again or new people because God has created them again. He does this when they become Christians! The spirit in verses 10 through 12 from the Christian point of view means the Holy Spirit, another name for God. It is the part of God that he puts in us when we become Christians. The human heart can only be changed by a Divine agency. A further study will be done under the heading, "The Human Requirement."

The Torment in David's Soul

In its confession of sin, the psalm is extensive in three ways. First, the David who prays is gripped with a sense of sin. It is his primary problem. He accepts it. Indeed, it is always in his mind. It has been a fact and a factor all his life. He was conceived and born in sin. It is not just a matter of what he has done, but what he is. He has done something, but that doing has become part of his identity; and even more, the failure revealed a flaw in his own being.

Second, his sin is against God, only against God. What he has done, and is, is wrong in the sight of God. Sin raises a question of his relation to God; whether God will be finished with David by casting him out of God's presence and/or withdraw the presence and power of his Holy Spirit from his life. David is under the judgment of God. He can accept some suffering or

anguish in his life as God's punishment. He knows that God is in the right, that it is just that he should be punished. God alone can blot out his transgressions, wash and purify him of his sin, cleanse him of the stain he feels on his life, deal with his guilt.

Third, the one who prays in this psalm wants to be changed. David knows that simply dealing with something he has done is not enough. God must deal with what he is. David pleads for God to create him again, to create a pure heart, to give him a new steady spirit. He wants to offer a contrite and broken spirit, not a sacrifice. He knows that a sacrifice will not do. God does not want some thing, but himself.¹⁰ Many of the prayers for help say, "Change my situation so I may praise you." This one says, "Change me; I am the problem."

The Problem

Unquestionably, the heart of the world's problems is the sinfulness of man. But more than that, the source of each person's problems is sin, most specifically, one's own sin. Every Christian must set a watch over his own life. Once sin is made known to the heart, confession must follow immediately. The good news of Jesus Christ is that full forgiveness of sin is offered for all who will repent of their sin and come to him. The apostle John declared, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:9).¹¹ David certainly felt his sin and was ready to confess it.

There are three Hebrew root words for sin (*ht'*, *pš'*, and *'wh*) which occur 959 times in the Hebrew Bible. Thirteen of those times are in Psalm 51. It is interesting to note that all three root words are used in the beginning of this psalm. They are "transgressions" (*pš'*), "iniquity" (*'wh*), and sin (*ht'*), which is an indication that David was aware of the gravity of his sin. Note again, the three words for sin used by David along with Hebrew understanding of these words in these opening verses:

(1) *My transgressions*. The Hebrew word used here means the willful breaking of a known law, the deliberate overstepping of a well marked boundary. This is rebellion against authority, unwillingness to stay within the limits laid down by God for men. Such deliberate disobedience is blameworthy, for no irresponsibility is implied. The rebellious spirit is deserving of punishment.

(2) *Mine iniquity*. This word indicates that which is not in conformity with a standard. It is the opposite of righteousness. Instead of being true, or correct, the deed is warped, awry, askew. The parallel English word *wrong* is related to the word *wring*, indicating that which is twisted out of shape. Iniquity is therefore that which is perverted, disregarding the norms and standards of right living.

¹⁰ James Luther Mays, *Preaching and Teaching the Psalms* (Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 2006), 124

¹¹ Steven J. Lawson, *Holman Old Testament Commentary* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2003), 268.

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(3) *My sin*. Here is the word which means to miss the mark, or miss the path. It is error, though not accidental. It is failure to arrive at the goal, failure to achieve, failure to live in ways that God requires. Commonest of all the kinds of sin, it is nevertheless equally devastating in its result, for the sinner just does not arrive where he is supposed to be.¹²

There are some translations that render the word sin or transgression as "offense" or "wicked." This word however carries the connotation of rebellion. So the word "transgression" is an unsatisfactory translation since it does not imply the idea of a rebellious act. In verse 1, the psalmist appeals to God's compassion to blot out any rebellion. In verse 3, there is an honest acknowledgment of the personal nature of this revolt. Still the rebellious psalmist can use this experience to lead back others in revolt against God (v.15).¹³

The wrong for which David seeks forgiveness is not some simple shortcoming. It is rather complex with a series of sins, following one upon another with inevitable consequences, piling up as it were until the psalmist can no longer maintain his self-respect. Unable to bear the weight of these sins, and in desperate submission, he throws himself upon the mercy of God. David begs that the loving-kindness that God had revealed to the prophet may effectively bring relief to his troubled conscience. It is because God is merciful and full of loving-kindness that the sinner dares plead forgiveness. A righteous God demands righteousness in men, and this man has fallen short.

The sin is so vivid in the mind of David and he senses how unethical he became that all of it was in violation of God's righteous character. Men have been wronged and have done wrong, but important as this may be, it is engulfed in the greater implication that all sin is ultimately against God. God would therefore be perfectly justified in pronouncing a well-deserved judgment of condemnation, only because sin is freely admitted can there be any claim of divine mercy bestowed upon anyone. David is not even trying to excuse himself from his sinful condition, but he adds that his guilt is a lifelong standing. From his very birth he has felt the taint of sin. Verse 5 reads, "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity; And in sin did my mother conceive me." This is not saying that some stigma of sin was attached to him from birth, but rather, as a member of the human race, he is subject to the pollution that characterizes all men, whereby "there is none righteous, no, not one." As the Apostle Paul said in the New Testament, "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."

The whole human race is afflicted by the same sad story. From Adam to the present day, it has somehow been easier to do wrong than to do right. Whether this is the sin of Adam, inherited by the race or not, whether the psalmist had any conception of original sin or not, the fact remains that he knew the shortcomings with which he was born, and throughout his life he had experienced the consequences of this fact. Some have been ready to point out that he might have claimed this as a mitigating circumstance. He might have begged excuse on the ground that, being merely human, he should not be held accountable for what is universal among all individuals. But it appears that he does not plead for leniency on this account, preferring rather to let his whole sorry condition be fully stated, then giving God the opportunity

¹² Gurdon C. Oxtoby, "Conscience and confession: a study of the fifty-first Psalm," *Interpretation* 3, no. 4 (October 1949), 418, <http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.seuniversity.edu:2048/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rfh&AN=ATLA0000653175&site=ehost-live> (accessed October 3, 2008).

¹³ John F. Craghan, "Sin, Cleansing, and Restoration." *The Bible Today* 31 (March 1993), 69.

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to take the necessary steps of cleansing. The greater the degradation, the greater is the need of God's mercy.¹⁴

Perhaps the greatest sin is when man fails to recognize that his sin is ever before him. It is very easy for someone to say, "I'm okay," when no one is looking or knows about their sin or wrong that has been committed. David carried this sin in his life for a year, even though he thought no one knew all the pieces to the puzzle of which he had done. What he did was following him, pressing upon him, haunting him, and eating at him on the inside while he tried to show truthfulness on the outside to the people around him. All through this process he knew he had failed God.

God insists on truth in the inward parts. Outward conduct means something, but of far greater importance is the well-being of the inner life. He is not pleased when a man openly turns aside to sin, but He is also not satisfied with one who claims to be living the victorious life and is yet smothering wrong desires to keep them from finding expression. God must have truth in the inward parts; but David cannot produce it. At the very fountain-head of life, when as yet it was altogether hidden from the sight of men in his mother's womb, there was the taint of sin. He can no more alter that than he can undo the wrong he has committed. Where, then, can he turn? Where is there hope? "O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?"¹⁵

Sin, though it is a universal sickness that infects everyone, never ceases to be intensely personal. Certainly the psalm that came from David's stricken heart shows how personal and intimate sin can become to an individual. In reading this psalm a person should never become a spectator while David cries his heart and soul out to God. What really needs to be seen is the lovable Spirit that God gave without reservation to David, so that the Spirit through him might bless the world and become the vehicle of confession for erring saints in all ages. Is this not in line with the economy of God's providence? God allows evil with all of its deadly effects to attack us and yet out of it he makes good to grow. The bright side of this is that God's people can come to know the power and fullness of the divine salvation. As people look back over their own lives, do they not see how wonderfully the perfecting grace of God has reached out to incorporate their very sins, making them contribute something to their spiritual development and usefulness?¹⁶

The Need

The one who prays this psalm wants and needs help. Those needs can be seen by observing the imperative verbs in this section. "Teach me," says the psalmist, hoping to learn

¹⁴ Oxtoby, 419.

¹⁵ Everett Falconer Harrison, "A study of Psalm 51." *Bibliotheca sacra* 92, no. 365 (January 1935): 34, <http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.seuniversity.edu:2048/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rft&AN=ATLA0001530531&site=ehost-live> (accessed October 3, 2008).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 27-28.

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something through this experience. Following are more requests for the Lord to help with the problem of the sin: “Purge me...wash me...blot out all my iniquities.”¹⁷

David was deeply conscious of his deep, polluted depravity. This, in his own mind, he contrasted strongly with the nature of God, and with what God must require and be pleased with. He felt that God could not approve of or love such a heart as his that is vile and corrupt. David also felt that it was necessary that he should have a pure heart in order to meet with the favor of a Holy God. Not only is God a holy God, David realizes that He is a merciful God, and on that basis is the grounds for hope and not rejection so that he can receive forgiveness in his life.

As Gurdon C. Oxtoby shared the three different words for sin in Psalm 51, he also describes by three different terms for the desired forgiveness:

- (1) *Blot out*. This means to wipe away, to clear by removal from one's sight. Isaiah 44:22 speaks of blotting out transgressions "as a thick cloud."
- (2) *Wash me*. This word is used of washing clothes, which may be cleansed by treading them in water, so that the stain and soil may be rinsed away.
- (3) *Cleanse me*. This is a ceremonial word, indicating that the cleansing is in the nature of purification. It is the phrase used in declaring one clean of leprosy. The inner nature is to be purified as well as the outward appearance.¹⁸

The threefold need for cleansing is expressive of David's comprehension of sin in his appeal to God. But the psalmist's sin is not spoken of as being against men; it is against God himself. His point is very clear in verse 4:

“Against You, You only, have I sinned,
And done *this* evil in Your sight;
That You may be found just when You speak.
And blameless when You judge.”

When David prayed for his sin to be wiped away, the language in several translations is “blot out” my transgressions. There is a reference where personal accounts are being kept and the psalmist is appealing for his transgressions to be wiped away, erased, or blotted out. The Hebrew word means “to obliterate” expressing a vigorous action in the petition for forgiveness. The sense seems to be to obliterate a name, a remembrance, or a written curse. The use in Psalm 51 may be metaphoric in a general sense, as in Isaiah 44:22, “I have swept away your transgressions like a cloud, and your sins like the morning mist....” (NIV) However, it is likely that the idea of erasing from a written scroll or tablet is in mind. Several places in the Old Testament refer to deeds and/or names of people being written on a scroll or book, as in

¹⁷ James Limburg, *Westminster Bible Companion*, Vol. Psalms (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 173.

¹⁸ Oxtoby, 418.

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Psalm 69:28, “Let them be blotted out of the book of the living, and not be written with the righteous.”¹⁹

When looking at these verses, never was a more earnest appeal made by a sinner than that which was made in this verse. Never was there a more sincere cry for mercy. First, it shows where a person should begin in their prayers when they are pressed down with the consciousness of sin; with a cry for mercy, and not an appeal to justice. It secondly shows the ground and the measure of hope for individuals from the compassion of an infinitely benevolent God. Thirdly, the cry for mercy shows the place that must be taken, and the argument that must be relied upon - a place among sinners, and an argument that God has been merciful to great sinners, and that therefore He may be merciful to the sinning individual.

Sin has a powerful impact on the total person. It stirs up both the feeling of stain and the sense of shame. One may feel compelled to go public with their burden and thus renew the bond of covenant with God. One thing for sure is that they want that stain and shame to be erased or as the psalmist puts it, “washed” away from their life.

The word wash (*kābas*) in the Hebrew means “to full,” that is “to make stuff clean and soft by treading, kneading and beating them in cold water.” It is always used in reference to laundering clothing and never of washing the body. In all but one case in the Old Testament (2 Samuel 19:24), washing is associated with ceremonial cleanness. Both the priests and the people were to be in clean clothes when they appeared before God. Involvement in the rituals that dealt specifically with atonement and death resulted in ceremonial uncleanness and necessitated washing the clothes (Leviticus 16:26, 28; Numbers 19:7, 8, 10, 19, 21).²⁰

The reference has to do with becoming contaminated in one way or another. Particularly important contaminants would be leprosy and related maladies for, aside from the hygienic factor, these were evidently types of sin. This imagery is picked up in Psalm 51:2, 7, in which David depicts his sin as a contagious leprosy in need of cleansing. It is impossible for David to wash away his own iniquity as a person would wash their clothing by a stream in cold water, beating them against a rock, and working them over with wood. The answer for David’s dilemma is found in Malachi 3:2 in the one who would appear as refiner’s fire and fuller’s soap to deal with the sins of his people. The second verse transfers this image to God’s way of dealing with guilt. In the seventh verse, the psalmist links this divine activity of washing with such great intensity so that the stain is removed and the final result would be that of whiteness.

Another description of David’s need was that he needed to be purified. The description implies that a person is no longer a carrier of a contagious disease. In the circumstances of David, the emphasis is clearly upon the inner quality of life that results in outward conduct. When a person has missed the mark and incurred guilt and penalty for sin, they needed to be purified (*chata*) of that sin. The symbols of forgiveness, common to priestly acts, are included in David’s prayer:

¹⁹ Marvin Tate, 14

²⁰ R. L. Harris, G. L. Archer, and B. K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, (Chicago, Illinois: Moody Press, 1999, c1980) electronic edition.

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⁷ Purify me with hyssop, and I shall be clean :

Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

⁸ Make me to hear joy and gladness,

That the bones which thou hast broken may rejoice.

⁹ Hide thy face from my sins,

And blot out all mine iniquities. (KJV)

The word purify in this prayer has the meaning “to purify from sin” or more literally “to un-sin” or de-sin.” So the prayer is literally to be “un-sinned with hyssop.”²¹ Since the hyssop was used in the ceremony of cleansing the leper (Leviticus 14:49, 52), it may be that David was thinking of himself in terms of such a creature, spotted and unclean, unfit for the society of his fellow-men. If God will do this great thing, His erring child will be clean, that is, bright and clear.²²

Hyssop is a wild herb, perhaps the caper, with glossy green leaves thought to possess cleansing powers. Water, or blood of the sacrifice, was sprinkled with a small bundle of such leaves as part of certain ceremonials of cleansing. The word purify in this passage has the connotation of doing away with the error and bringing ceremonial cleanness. Yet it is clear that our psalm is not dealing in realms of ceremony, though such is its vocabulary. It is the purging of the heart and mind that is meant, the washing bringing purity like that of new-fallen snow.²³

Assured of such purging, the psalmist will be overcome with joy and gladness, and his sickness of soul, reflected in illness of body, will be replaced with healthy rejoicing. When God turns his face aside, no longer regarding the wrongdoings and acts of unrighteousness, then forgiveness will have become a fact, a cause for jubilation. It is most significant that the psalm does not end with the assurance of forgiveness. The sensitive soul rightly perceives that this is only the beginning. Now must start a reconstruction of the mind and heart, bringing forth fruits worthy of repentance.

Whiter than snow! How it speaks to us of divine purity. The story is told of a pastor who loved to visit one of the poor of his flock, a woman who took in washing for a living. One day he passed along and noticed her hanging out the washing, so he stepped into the yard for a moment's chat. Knowing her well, he ventured to remark that the clothes did not seem as white as usual. She gave him a reproving look, then said, "My clothes are always white, but today you see them against a background of new-fallen snow and they look dirty; nothing can stand against the whiteness of the Almighty."²⁴ To be whiter than snow is to be completely clean and prepared for the divine presence.

²¹ Mitchell Dahood, *The Anchor Bible Psalms II; 51-100*, vol 2, (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1968)

5.

²² Harrison, 30.

²³ Oxtoby, 420.

²⁴ Harrison, 31.

The Solution

There is a false concept or notion that man has and that is to bear the load of his conscience that is defiled with sin rather than cast it upon the Lord. David learn this lesson the hard way. But there is more that needs to be seen in this account. The Lord deliberately waited until the child was born, then sent His servant to announce its death.

David loved the child, but every day when he looked at the child it reminded him of his sin. God would not allow him to look upon the child any longer. God's chastening would remove all the profit and pleasure derived from sin. Then and then alone will the soul be pure. Even though this may seem cruel in the eyes of man, God brings about a marvelous outcome. When the lessons were learned and the tears dried away, God gave David and Bathsheba another son whom they named Solomon. Once again he sent his prophet, this time to tell of the Lord's love for the babe and to give him a name memorializing that love, a name that contained David's own and so served to memorialize him also. The name God gave was Jedidiah, which means "beloved by God" as a token of His divine favor. (2 Samuel 12:25).²⁵

A glance at the life of Simon Peter may serve to confirm this truth. It was at the very time that he became self-confident and sought to prove his loyalty to Christ, that Simon failed. However, he came up again, sobered and strengthened, now a dependable instrument for spiritual work. Who can fail to see the wisdom behind Simon's fall? Out of it came Peter the rock, upon which the early church in its human organization could safely rest. Whether they were aware of it or not, it meant something to the thousands who heard him at Pentecost, and were pricked in their hearts at having denied the Lord of life and glory. This man who addressed them, Simon Peter, had passed that way himself.

The great difference between the natural and the supernatural lies in their contrasted ability to handle destructive forces.

It is said that nature loses nothing, that when catastrophe pelts her bosom, she merely concedes a loss in form, not in matter. That may be so, but she cannot restore: she can only revise. When a tree falls, nature may turn it into peat or fertilize the soil, but the process involves decay. She cannot set the tree in place again and give it a more abundant life than it had before. David was as a tree, a mighty cedar of Lebanon, the greater its height the more impressive its fall, the more thunderous its reverberations, the more impossible its restoration. But what is impossible with nature and with man is possible with God.²⁶

God knew that David would sin and fail Him, yet in advance of it He made a covenant with David and bound Himself to continue David's seed and throne until, as later prophecy revealed, His own Son should come as that Seed and as King to sit upon that throne. This is the same God of all grace and mercy who has chosen us in Christ before the foundation of the world, before the rise of sin, before our own complete and utter failure. It is apparent that he created us to obey His holy will.

²⁵ Ibid., 29.

²⁶ Ibid., 37.

The Human Requirement

Broken and Contrite Spirit

It is natural that the more deeply one has sinned, the more fervent and persistent will be his prayer for pardon. When people metaphorically speaking sacrifice their lives on the altar and pray with a "broken spirit and a repentant heart," there is a willingness to let God have an impact upon their future. When the psalmist speaks of a "steadfast spirit" (v. 10) and a "willing or generous spirit" (v. 15), these phrases evoke the image of people who, having experienced disaster, seek to enter upon a new manner of life.²⁷

The pre-exilic prophets from Amos to Jeremiah agreed and declared that having the forms or ritual of sacrifices but not denouncing formal acts of sin were utterly futile. It was only when one has a change in their heart or spirit upon presenting the sacrifice can they have a worthy expression of worship to God. This teaching had taken deep hold of the psalmist as we read from his writings:

¹⁶ For thou delightest not in sacrifice; else would I give it:
Thou hast no pleasure in burnt-offering.

¹⁷ The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit :

A broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise. (KJV)

While David has been using, to some extent, the language of the priests, the ritual, as such, has no merit for him. Even the burnt-offering that might express true gratitude remains unkindled, for God's demands are not along these lines. With fine discernment, emphasis is placed upon sacrifice of oneself instead of bulls and goats. A broken and repentant heart is worth any number of lambs slain upon the altar. When man's purposes are redeemed and presented as gifts to Almighty God, this is, indeed, the greatest offering that anyone can make, whether in the era of the great prophets of Israel, or under the enlightenment of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.²⁸

In the seventeenth verse it is said, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit," not "broken spirits." The one heart that makes itself an altar is the equivalent of all sacrifice. Yet even this fact does not void the sacrifices, as the nineteenth verse demonstrates; for this reason they must continue until their work is done in the culmination of the death of the Lamb of God.

"A broken and a contrite heart, these, O God, you will not despise." In modern usage, "contrite" has come to mean "repentant" or "full of regret for sin." But the word, like that in the original, contains the thought of bruising or crushing. It is God's own task, frequently resented at first but cherished afterward, to take in hand that hard and unprofitable lump that sin has formed and pound it small as the dust. It is from this lowly vantage point, where He began with man, He may again by the Potter's touch produce a man—a man remade.²⁹

²⁷ Craghan, 71.

²⁸ Oxtoby, 423.

²⁹ Harrison, 36.

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This brokenness began when David prayed, "Do not cast me away from Your presence, And do not take Your Holy Spirit from me." The question arises, why did David use the term "Holy Spirit" in this passage? Was there a special impartation to both him and Isaiah who again is the other individual who used that same term in his writings? We need care in expounding this verse, for both the context and the historical background must contribute to the understanding of it.

First, this is not just a plea for strength to live a moral, religious life pleasing to God, but it is a prayer from a person who is in fear of his very life. The petition is followed with the view or thought that his character would become stabilized. This was a serious matter for a king, because people normally revered and followed him, and he did not want to be undependable to them. And with that thought, there rises before his mind, like a shadow or figure of Saul sitting uneasily on this throne, his fingers tightened about his javelin, his face clouded and glum as the evil spirit swept in to take command where once the Spirit of God had ruled.

David knew something of the horror of rejection, for time and again he had summoned all the soothing charms of song and lyre in order to quiet the restless and unhappy Saul. Must he share Saul's fate? Must he lose his favored position as the anointed of the Lord? It is an error to think of the removal of the Spirit as equivalent to the loss of salvation. The Spirit came upon David when he was anointed by Samuel (1 Samuel 16:13); but he knew the Lord before that, as a mere lad among the sheep. The taking away of the Spirit would indicate that God's choice had fallen upon another.³⁰

Secondly, it is not certain that David understood precisely what was meant by the phrase "thy Holy Spirit" as what is now denoted by it, as referring to the third person of the Trinity. The language used by him, would denote some influence coming from God producing holiness, as if God breathed his own spirit, or his own self, into David's soul. The language, however, is appropriate to be used in the higher and more definite sense in which it is now employed, as denoting that sacred Spirit, the Holy Spirit, by whom the heart is renewed, and by whom comfort is imparted to the soul. It is not necessary to suppose that the inspired writers of the Old Testament had a full and complete comprehension of the meaning of the words which they employed, or that they appreciated all that their words might properly convey, or the fullness of signification in which they might be properly used in the times of the Gospel.

Thirdly, the Holy Spirit may have been imparted upon David, and a similar impartation would happen on the Day of Pentecost. The proof to the church of this impartation could have been the evidence of speaking in other tongues. This was now God's sign or choice made available for all the believers in the church age and the Holy Spirit was going to be available to all who are now under the New Covenant. The Holy Spirit was also given and manifested to give us power and be witnesses, which is also what David experienced. The change in David's life appears to be the same type of change in the hearts of the early believers on the Day of Pentecost. When God causes the divine Holy Spirit to work in a person, that person has the strength and power to live a holy life with great intensity so when sin comes before them it is revealed through the Holy Spirit and that person can turn from it. This power is available to anyone who cries out to God.

³⁰ Ibid., 35.

Needing and Wanting a New Heart from God (Five Aspects)

Why we need a new heart is a matter of theology, not physiology. In the medical world of discourse, we would say that the heart we were born with is the best we can have, and keeping it is a major concern. And when a physical heart starts to go bad, it lets the subject know with unmistakable and usually painful symptoms. However, in the biblical and liturgical world of discourse, heart problems are quite different. We are born and we grow up metaphorically speaking, with "bad hearts." That is, when self is left on its own, it is anxious and alienated. And because that is true, the self can never alone give the unmistakable symptoms of trouble.

The diagnosis comes from the outside. It is when the unclean sees the holy, when the faithless sees faithfulness, when the anxious senses grace, then the trouble becomes known. Today Christians are in a covenant relationship with Christ and can hear his commands, "follow me." It is for this reason we know our need to pray, "create a heart for me, different from the one I have." How we get a new heart is by divine help, not human wisdom. If a person's physical heart goes bad, the learning and judgment of a medical doctor is their best hope. But the pure heart, the steadfast spirit, the empowered life, the joyful heart, and submissive will only come by the creative work of God. Remember that "create" in the biblical vocabulary means "bring something into existence that was not there before." God alone is subject of the verb. Authentic creation can come from God alone.

That means we don't know how we get a new heart in the same way we can know how things work in the spheres of physics and chemistry and biology. Even the New Testament cannot settle on one way to describe this transforming work of God in the human consciousness. The apostles speak of "being a new creation in Christ Jesus," or a "second birthing," of "passing from death to life," of "putting on a new nature" that mean the same many-faceted thing. Christians know this happens. Scripture, history, and experience are witnesses. But it happens in fashions and modes as various as human personality and culture. To a mentality accustomed to asking for orderly, controllable data, it remains mysterious and intangible.

To pray the prayer for a new heart necessarily involves the use of the means of grace through Scripture and prayer as a way to let the Lord work on and shape our mind our conscience. "Have this mind in you, which you have in Christ Jesus," says the apostle. To which we can only respond, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me." One thing we are certain: this only happens when someone is engaged with the risen Christ through the Holy Spirit.³¹

There are five aspects worth mentioning that David wanted God to change in his life as he was given a new heart:

Pure heart. The problem with David was not just his failure in sinning, but a problem of the heart that caused the sin. In Hebrew, the "heart" is a metaphor for the seat of the intellect, the center of will and decision-making. The "spirit" within a person carries out the motive or the

³¹ Mays, 172.

intention of the heart. To pray for a newly created heart and for a new spirit is a confession that the heart, the will of the person, is the source of the problem. It is an admission that the hidden motives and intentions of the psalmist are so perverted and unstable that nothing short of a new creation from God will bring any significant change in who he is. And he has already confessed ten times in the first nine verses that he needs to change by the use of three nouns for sin: transgressions, iniquities and sin. The use of all three terms seems intended to be comprehensive, so that the psalmist's confession is far-reaching and complete.³² It would be well to note that the "heart" in the Old Testament, is an inclusive term, referring to the function of the inner man being able to feel, think, and will. The plea from the heart of the psalmist David is that after receiving a "created" heart that all three of the inner functions: the emotions, the thoughts, and the will be kept pure by a steadfast spirit. In a way, David is saying, "Let me think pure/clean thoughts, respond with pure/clean emotions, and make pure/clean decisions."³³ He is praying for a heart that would not yield to temptation; that would carry out holy resolutions; and that would be steadfast in the service of God.

Steadfast spirit. It is also significant that the prayer is for a "steadfast" spirit. This Hebrew word means to establish as firm and solid. It is the same word used in the promise to David (2 Samuel 7:16) that God would "establish" his descendants as kings of Israel. In this context, David had the external trappings of strength and permanence for his kingdom. Now there is the realization that the external appearance of stability is not much without an inner steadfastness and stability that will allow faithfulness in actions.³⁴ The Psalmist cannot make that happen by himself. The rituals of the temple cannot make that change. The sacrifices and the water may symbolize God's forgiveness, but forgiveness is not the same as creation. Something has to happen beyond the forgiveness. Something has to happen inside the psalmist on the level of the heart, that deals with who he is. So he cries out, "Create in me a new heart. Transform me and make me new. Put a new steadfast spirit within me."

Empowered life. Having undergone a transformation in the heart and of the spirit, the psalmist can now hope to be sustained by the lasting experience of the presence of Yahweh. The continued empowerment of the divine Holy Spirit and the renewed assurance of deliverance combine to provide a sustainable hope. Sin, however, has definite consequences. Confession does not always erase the effects of our sins or wrongs. Even forgiveness does not necessarily remove the pain. The psalmist indicates this by his statement, "Let the bones you [God] have crushed rejoice" (51:8). Crushed bones may "rejoice," but they may never be whole again. The effects of sinful choices and evil living may never fully depart from us, any more than the effects of long-term alcoholism or drug addiction or of AIDS contracted from an uncontrolled life of sexual addiction.³⁵ Unless God in His sovereignty touches us with His mighty power and heals us, our rejoicing may have to be expressed alongside the lasting consequences of our sin. David experienced this mighty power and prayed that the Holy Spirit not be taken from him. Jesus in the New Testament taught about effective prayer and said, "If you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give you the Holy Spirit to those who ask him" (Luke 11:13). No doubt David

³² Gerald H. Wilson, *The NIV Application Commentary*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Press, 2002).774.

³³ S. Edward Tesh and Walter D. Zorn, *The College Press NIV Commentary-Psalms*, Vol. 1 (Joplin, Missouri: College Press Publishing Company, 1999), 371.

³⁴ Dennis Brancher, *The Voice, CRI/Voice, Institute*, 2006, www.crivoice.org (accessed April 2, 2008).

³⁵ Wilson, 782.

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experienced the Holy Spirit that produced holiness and was committed to living an empowered life.

Joyful heart. It is not enough to enjoy the satisfaction of forgiveness wrought by the Spirit of God. Others must be brought to know that same satisfaction. Having experienced forgiveness, the psalmist vows to do three things: teach, sing, and praise the Lord. One can understand that having experienced forgiveness, the one forgiven will want to tell, or more precisely, to sing the story of what God has done. That one will praise God and ask that God help him in praising. The psalmist devotion will not express itself in offering sacrifices but in offering himself to God.

The whole context of Psalm 51:13-15 is comprised of the psalmist looking forward to returning to the temple to give testimony to God's deliverance. It is of the essence of this public testimony that Yahweh is acknowledged before the people or perhaps it is thought of as speaking to all the nations. In this particular psalm, David's restoration, in the context of his confession of sin, will be evidence that God does forgive, as his chastisement has been evidence that God punishes. His public testimony will thus be at the same time a challenge and an invitation to other sinners to return to God (v 13). To give this testimony, he needs God's own help. His voice has been silenced by his sin and chastisement, and God must open his lips again by restoring him (v 15). Thus God will enable him to give praise to the one who has restored him, and thereby to be delivered from the possibility of incurring bloodguilt by not warning other sinners to turn from their evil way (v 14). It is in this sense that he prays, "deliver me from incurring bloodguilt." He prays to be kept from becoming answerable for the death of other sinners by failing to challenge and invite them to return to God.³⁶

After being forgiven, the one praying hopes to be happy again and to be right with God once more. David asked God to restore to him the joy of His salvation. There is no joy in sin, but how great is the joy that comes with forgiveness, cleansing, and reconciliation. "He went on his way rejoicing" is recorded of the Ethiopian, after he came up from the waters of baptism at the hands of Philip (Acts 8:34-39), and his experience of joy has been that of millions since.³⁷ David makes no attempt to evade the truth when Nathan the prophet confronts David of the sin of adultery and murder. The blood of Uriah is on his hands. He pleads that he be spared the death penalty for committing such a crime. David carried this sin in his heart for some time. If he had attempted to praise God with the unconfessed and unrepented sin resting on his conscience, it would have been sheer hypocrisy. Evil in the heart and life keeps our lips from proclaiming praises unto God. But when God in His mercy forgives the sin, the lips are opened. David could not remain silent any longer. My mouth shall declare your praise. True happiness is to be found in the presence of God, and to remain exiled from Him would be a life of misery.

David would once more dance before the Lord for sheer joy. In fact, he has already prayed that such gladness may be his portion that the bones which the Lord has broken may rejoice (vs. 8). Bone is the strength of the human body. When the bone structure is crushed, the body is crippled and helpless. So real has been the chastening through which David had passed that he cannot rise up to praise and adore his God. But he has hope that when the

³⁶ Goldingay, John. "Psalm 51:16a (English 51:14a)." *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 40, no. 3 (1978): 3889-390, <http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.seuniversity.edu:2048/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rft&AN=ATLA0000767334&site=ehost-live> (accessed October 20, 2008).

³⁷ Tesh and Zorn, 372.

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Lord has freed him from the dreadful sense of guilt, his soul will be released to do service for God. When one is under a cloud, it is far better to be still than to venture upon a praise that must be only half-hearted. But let God release the prisoner from the toils of his groaning, and there will be a new song ascending to heaven. And this song of praise is pleasing to God, for it glorifies Him (Psalm 50:23).

Such praise, rising up out of a contrite heart, means more than any amount of sacrifice which is offered in cold detachment as a formal religious duty. It was the joy of salvation for which David's heart yearned, and in order that he might never again lose it, he asked one more thing of God: Grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. It is the sustaining presence of God's Spirit that David desires and asks for.³⁸

Submissive will. Lasting restoration and recovery can only be achieved on the basis of a renewed spiritual relationship with God. We cannot recreate a "clean heart" within ourselves. Only God can regenerate a heart and renew a spirit. The psalmist is right in saying, "Grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me" (51:12b). Even the power to desire restoration and utter the words of confession that begins this process of renewal - that power comes from God, not ourselves.³⁹ The Hebrew word rendered "free" Spirit (Psalm 51:12) "*nadib*" means willing, voluntary, or prompt. It would seem to mean "a willing spirit", that God would sustain David's own mind or spirit, in which he would be willing and ready to obey all the commands of God and to serve Him faithfully. What he prayed for was grace and strength that his life would be constant and firm, in which he would be always found willing and ready to keep the commandments of God. It is a prayer that should be prayed by all in which they will be willing to do what God requires of them, and to bear all that may be laid on them. This work of the Holy Spirit produced holiness and joy in David's life.

Conclusion

Most of us think of our sin as being utterly bereft of worth. That is one reason why we hesitate to confess our sin or acknowledge our struggles to others. But confession of sin can be the foundation of teaching and example (Psalm 51:13). Denying sin or covering it up prevents any others from drinking at the well of our experience and gaining the life-giving insights we have to offer.⁴⁰

This psalm celebrates the redemption of sin and that man will be made whiter than snow and be able to rejoice in salvation. However, if sin is not dealt with, the longer it goes on, people can become so distanced from it that they will more likely yawn at needing confession rather than experiencing joy and rejoicing in their lives. There are three areas that a person encounters with the Holy Spirit in looking at Psalm 51; sin, sacrifice, and salvation. Sin speaks of the broken relationship with God. Our society needs to reflect on sin. If we equate sin with bad habits, it is comparable to a physician who encourages a cancer patient in the self-deception that a probable tumor is just "a little bump" that will go away by itself. This deceit will prevent healing and could hasten the course of the disease. Secondly, sacrifice speaks of a

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Wilson, 782.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 783.

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broken spirit not to destroy an individual, but rather to become true selves, for God's sake. Thirdly, salvation that David asked for is not only about being saved from sin but also saved for a specific purpose. David experienced this for the remainder of his life. When we know ourselves to be forgiven, praise pours out of our lives not once, but always, because our joy overflows.⁴¹

One more thing that needs to be said is that God wants a contrite spirit rather than a multitude of sacrifices being offered to Him in trying to find forgiveness. When we then receive that forgiveness, we can promise to change our lives and be of good example to others. It is after reconciliation with God that we can be at peace. One need not live in guilt and shame forever.⁴² In other words, Christians do not need to fear failure.

Today the believer can marvel that the experience of the author of Psalm 51 so clearly parallels his experience with God in this age of grace. It should be no surprise that this psalm has become a treasure to the personal and corporate worship of the church from its early days. The cry of the seeker who is fully aware of his sin must be the same as that ascribed to David, "a clean heart and a steadfast spirit." We know now that the work of regeneration creates this new spiritual life so that we are brought into God's presence by the Spirit causing us to cry, "Abba!" The Holy Spirit also gives us a new joy and willingness to serve him. And it is still true that God can only bless those whose spirits are truly broken of self and pride before Him. What David so deeply sought is now offered to all in Jesus Christ.

⁴¹ Clair Vonk Brooks, "Psalm 51," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology*, Vol. 49, no. 1 (<http://search.ebscohost.ezproxy.seuniversity.edu:2048/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=9502134726&site=ehost-live>, January 1995), 62-66.

⁴² Robinet, 37.