

PSALM 51:10

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Brad Norman

Turn in your Bibles to Psalm 51. We've now finished studying verses 1–9, and so we've reached the end of the first section in this psalm. As I've told you several times already, this psalm has a total of three sections. They're found in verses 1–9, 10–17, and 18–19. I'm calling the first one "confession," the second one "restoration," and the third one "intercession." And what we saw in the first section was actually a confession sandwich. Strictly speaking we only see the theme of confession in verses 3–6, which are found in the very center of this section. But in verses 1–2 David made four requests to God in which he was basically asking God to forgive him. Then in verses 7–9 he made six more requests and once again asked for forgiveness. After David confessed his sin, it was appropriate for him to repeat his request to be forgiven.

So in verse 7 we saw the first two of these six requests. David said, "Purify me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow." The Hebrew word for purify refers to the removal of sin here. And David asked God to use hyssop to do that. Hyssop branches were used in cleansing ceremonies to sprinkle water or blood. But David wasn't saying that he hoped God would literally sprinkle him with a hyssop branch. He was speaking metaphorically and using ceremonial language to refer to a spiritual issue. He was unclean morally and needed God to purify him of his sin. And he knew that if God granted his request, he would be clean. The Hebrew word for clean is used multiple times in the book of Leviticus to refer to being cleansed from a skin disease. Once again David was using ceremonial language to refer to moral purity.

Then in the second half of verse 7, David asked God to wash him so that he would be whiter than snow. The Hebrew word for wash is used in Exodus 19 to refer to washing clothes. So when David asked God to wash him, he was picturing himself as a set of dirty clothes that needed to be cleaned. And once he was cleaned, he would be whiter than snow. Now sometimes the Hebrew word for snow is used negatively to refer to a skin disease. So in these cases snow ironically pictures a condition that requires cleansing. But normally snow has a positive connotation in Scripture and represents the condition of someone who has been cleansed. It's a beautiful picture of being forgiven by God.

Then we saw two more requests from David to God in Psalm 51:8. He wrote, "Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice." Here David's focus was on the result of being forgiven. He wanted to experience the joy of forgiveness. But he started not by talking about his own joy but the joy of others. And more specifically he was talking about the deep joy that people experienced when they worshiped God together at the tabernacle. But David wasn't permitted to hear this joy because of his sin with

Bathsheba. Until God forgave him, he was excluded from corporate worship at the tabernacle. He wasn't just separated from fellowship with God because of his sin; he was also separated from fellowship with God's people and wasn't allowed to worship with them.

Then in the second half of verse 8, David asked God to let the bones he had crushed rejoice. David was picturing himself as a person who had been physically beaten. He felt as though God had taken a club and had struck him over and over. But this doesn't mean that God literally crushed David's bones. Most likely David was speaking figuratively to point back to verse 3 and the fact that God was constantly reminding him about his sin. But we know from other passages that there's an element of physical suffering we sometimes experience when we sin. In Psalm 38:3 David said, "There is no soundness in my body because of your indignation; there is no health in my bones because of my sin." And 1 Corinthians 11:30 Paul said that many believers were sick and ill in the church of Corinth because they participated in the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner.

Now we shouldn't conclude that all suffering is a direct result of sin. This is the mistaken assumption that Job's friends made about him. But we need to acknowledge that sometimes our sin does lead to suffering. The main impact is on our inner person, but inner pain can have physical effects, like a headache or the inability to sleep. Now we don't know how much David was suffering in Psalm 51. We know that he was suffering on the inside, and perhaps he was suffering on the outside as well. But however he was suffering from his sin, he didn't want to experience it anymore. That's why he asked God in verse 8 to let his bones rejoice. The Hebrew word for rejoice comes from a root that literally means "circle." The idea probably has to do with circling or whirling around in joy. We have a word for that; we call it "dancing." David wanted to have such exuberant joy that it would be expressed physically.

So in verse 8 of this psalm, David was basically asking God to forgive him by focusing on the result of forgiveness. First of all, he wanted to hear his fellow believers rejoice. He wanted to be part of corporate worship with them. But he didn't just want to hear others rejoice in worship. He also wanted to rejoice along with them. Then in verse 9 we see the last two requests in the opening section of this psalm. In this verse David wrote, "Turn your face away from my sins and blot out all my guilt." David finished this section by using the same Hebrew verb that we saw at the very beginning of the psalm. In verse 1 he asked God to blot out his rebellion, and in verse 9 he asked God to blot out all his guilt. The verb here just means to wipe something clean.

But at the beginning of this verse, David used a new verb. He asked God to turn his face away from David's sins. The Hebrew verb here for turn literally means "to hide," and this is the word that we see in many other translations. Now when we see this verb with the Hebrew word for "face" in the Book of Psalms, there's usually a negative connotation. For example, in Psalm 27:9 David said, "Do not hide your face from me; do not turn your servant away in anger." But of course here in Psalm 51:9 David wasn't asking God to hide his face from him but from his sins. He didn't want God to look at his sins or pay attention to them. He basically didn't want God to take his sins into account on judgment day. The Hebrew word for sins refers to missing the mark of God's perfect standard. And it's in the plural here to emphasize the multitude of times that David failed to live in obedience to God.

Then at the end of verse 9 David switched to a different word that refers to his disobedience. He asked God to blot out all his guilt. The Hebrew word for guilt refers to crooked behavior and going astray from the straight path of righteousness. And David used the word “all” to stress that he had disobeyed God many times. He needed all his sins to be forgiven, not just his adultery with Bathsheba. Now it’s true that at the moment of salvation God forgives us of all our sins—past, present, and future. But that’s in a judicial sense; as Christians we still need ongoing forgiveness in a parental sense. Our sin harms our relationship with our heavenly Father. We don’t stop being his child, but we need to be restored to him. So whenever we sin, we need to pause and confess it to God. Then we will experience the wonderful joy of forgiveness.

Now let’s move into verse 10 of Psalm 51 and dig into some new material. We’re ready to begin studying the second section in this psalm, which is focused on the theme of restoration. Look at what David wrote in verse 10: “God, create a clean heart for me and renew a steadfast spirit within me.” We’re entering into one of the most memorable parts of this psalm. One of the reasons it’s so memorable is that the words of verses 10–12 in the King James Version were set to music by the Christian singer and songwriter Keith Green. After he died in a plane crash in 1982, his wife released a recording he had made of the song. I remember singing it in church fairly regularly when I was growing up in the 1980s and 1990s.

Now in general I like songs that have lyrics taken directly from Scripture. Setting words to music helps us to memorize them, and of course we should be striving to memorize God’s Word. Our children’s Sunday school curriculum has a new song for the kids to learn about once a month, and the words come directly from a Scripture passage. I love how these songs help the kids to memorize Scripture. And the Book of Psalms is an ideal place to go when we’re looking for lyrics to put in a song. After all, the psalms were originally meant to be sung. But there are some dangers that we face when we sing a passage of Scripture. They’re the same dangers that are lurking whenever we read the Bible. We need to be careful not to take passages of Scripture out of context or misapply them. And these dangers are especially present in Psalm 51:10–12.

So in keeping with our normal practice, we’re going to take a careful look at these verses, starting with verse 10 today. In this verse we see two more requests from David. The Hebrew verbs here are imperatives, just like we saw in verses 1–2 and more recently in verse 9. David wasn’t giving commands to God, but he was making bold and urgent requests. But in verse 10 David changed his focus. In the first section his requests were focused on his need to be forgiven. He was asking God to get rid of his sin. But in verse 10 he wasn’t asking for something to be removed. Instead he wanted God to give him a clean heart and a steadfast spirit. He wanted his sin to be replaced by a stronger commitment to God.

Notice that David explicitly addressed his requests to God in verse 10. He didn’t have to do that, because we already know from verse 1 that he was talking to God. But I believe he repeated the word “God” here in verse 10 because he was starting a new section. He was basically hitting the reset button. The Hebrew word for God in both places is pronounced *elohim*. It’s used over two thousand times in the Old Testament, and so it’s a very common term. You may have heard about this word before, because it’s often found in Christian books that list various names of God.

But this word is actually not a proper noun; instead it's simply a common noun that indicates deity. It usually refers to the true God in the Old Testament, but sometimes it's used to describe false gods. There are even verses that have both nuances side by side. A good example of this is found in Leviticus 19:4. Listen to what God said in this verse: "Do not turn to idols or make cast images of gods for yourselves; I am the LORD your God." So first we have the word "gods" in the plural with a lowercase G. Then we have the word "God" in the singular with a capital G. In each case the Hebrew word is *elohim*, but only the second one refers to the true God. He was basically commanding the Israelites not to worship false gods because they already worshiped the true God.

So whenever we run into the word *elohim* in the Old Testament, we need to decide whether it's referring to false gods or the true God. Now we might think that it's as simple as checking to see if the word is singular or plural in a particular passage. But the interesting thing about this word is that it's almost always plural, even when it clearly refers to the true God. This feature adds intensity and stresses his majesty. So we have to depend on the context when we decide if *elohim* is referring to false gods or the true God. And it's obvious in verses 1 and 10 of Psalm 51 that David was addressing the true God and not false gods. After all, we know from the rest of Scripture that he was a man after God's own heart. He worshiped Yahweh, the God of Israel. But he didn't refer to God by name in this psalm, and I think the reason is that his relationship with God had been affected by his sin. So he just used a general word for deity, and it conveys the idea of supremacy. He was emphasizing that God is superior to every other being in the universe. He's the sovereign ruler over everything.

But David didn't actually start verse 10 with the word "God." In the Hebrew text that term is actually in the middle of the verse. Most Bible translations are more literal here with the word order than the Christian Standard Bible. They show that David began with the first of his two requests in this verse. He wrote, "Create a clean heart for me." The Hebrew verb for create refers to the initiation of something new. It's used about 50 times in the Old Testament, and in every case God was the one who did the action of the verb. On many occasions it's used to refer to the creation of the universe. We can see this in the very first verse of the Bible. Genesis 1:1 says, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."

Now some students of Scripture have concluded that this Hebrew word always refers to creating something out of nothing. And we should certainly acknowledge that God did indeed create the universe out of nothing. But that's only true because of the context and not because of some inherent meaning in the Hebrew word. After all, it's used again three times in Genesis 1:27, which says that "God created man in his own image; he created him in the image of God; he created them male and female." But chapter 2 and verse 7 clarifies that "God formed the man out of the dust from the ground." And then chapter 2 and verse 22 states that "God made the rib he had taken from the man into a woman." So neither one of them was created out of nothing. God used dust to create the man, and he used part of the man's body to create the woman. But God did make something new in each case, and he was the only one who could have created them.

Now we tend to think of creation as an instantaneous act. And certainly the creation of the universe happened very quickly. In many cases God simply spoke, and things immediately began to exist. But once

again that's true because of the context and not the underlying meaning in the Hebrew word. After all, it's used to refer to the creation of Israel. Listen to what God said in Isaiah 43:15: "I am the LORD, your Holy One, the Creator of Israel, your King." But we know that the creation of Israel took a long period of time. It started when God told Abraham to go to the land of Canaan, and it finished when God freed the descendants of Jacob from slavery in Egypt, entered into a covenant with them at Mount Sinai, and helped them conquer the land of Canaan. We're talking about a time period of almost 700 years!

So how was David using the Hebrew word for create in Psalm 51:10? Was he talking about instantaneous creation from nothing? To answer that question we need to take a closer look at what David asked God to create. He said, "Create a clean heart for me." The Hebrew word for heart normally doesn't refer to the literal organ of the body that pumps blood. Instead it points to the inner person. We use our English word "heart" in this way all the time. And our focus is usually on our feelings or emotions. But in Scripture the emphasis is on our thoughts. In Deuteronomy 15:9 Moses warned the Israelites, "Be careful that there isn't this wicked thought in your heart," and then he went on to describe this wicked thought. In Proverbs 16:9 Solomon said, "A person's heart plans his way, but the LORD determines his steps." So in Scripture the heart is where we think and plan. It's primarily a reference to our mind and our will, not our emotions.

But David's mind and his will were unclean because of his sin with Bathsheba. He thought about committing adultery with her, and then he made a decision to do it. And so David asked God to create a clean heart for him. The Hebrew word for clean is an adjective that comes from the same root as a Hebrew verb that we've already seen twice in this psalm. In verse 2 David asked God to "cleans" him from his sin, and in verse 7 he asked God to purify him so that he would be "clean." We saw that this verb is commonly used in the Old Testament to refer to ceremonial cleansing. It's used 30 times in Leviticus 13–14 with regard to the cleansing of skin diseases and contaminated garments. And the adjective is used there several times as well. The idea is that something defiled would become pure and could be used for worshiping God in the holy place of the tabernacle.

But in Psalm 51:10 David wasn't saying that his heart was ceremonially unclean. There wasn't anything inherently evil about being ceremonially unclean. God was just using mundane things to teach the Israelites how to make distinctions. They were like training wheels that help us learn how to ride a bike. The two big tires are what really matter; the training wheels are just temporary. In the same way, knowing the difference between something clean and something unclean helped the Israelites understand the difference between right and wrong. And that was David's problem in verse 10. He failed to learn from his training wheels and ended up falling over while he was riding his bike. He became morally unclean because of his adultery, and his sin flowed from his heart. That's why he needed God to create a clean heart for him.

By the way, that little word "for" in the Christian Standard Bible is a very good translation. If you know the song by Keith Green that he based on this passage, you'll remember that it has a different preposition here instead. It has the word "in" and not the word "for." And the King James Version isn't the only Bible translation that has the word "in." Most of the other translations have this word as well. But the Hebrew

preposition that David used here normally means “for” and not “in.” David’s focus was probably not on the location of the clean heart that he wanted. Instead his focus was on how this clean heart would benefit him. But of course it’s obvious that the heart for David was also in him. After all, the word “heart” refers to the inner person here.

But let’s return to this question that I presented earlier. How was David using the Hebrew word for create in Psalm 51:10? When David asked God to create a clean heart for him, what exactly did he mean? Was he talking about creation from nothing? Did he want God to completely replace his inner person and make him totally different? And did he expect this creation to happen in a moment? At first we might be inclined to say “yes” because of a key parallel passage. Listen to what God told the Israelites in Ezekiel 36:24–26: “For I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries, and will bring you into your own land. I will also sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean. I will cleanse you from all your impurities and all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will remove your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.”

So in this passage God was talking to his people during the Babylonian captivity. And he promised that he would bring them back to their land. But the rest of this passage shows that he was actually pointing forward to a restoration that is still in the future from our vantage point. That’s because this restoration is not just physical but spiritual. God went on to say that he would cleanse the Israelites from their sin and idolatry. The people were in captivity at the time because of their sin, and God graciously restored them to their land after 70 years. But the people as a whole still haven’t repented to this day, and that’s why they’ve been scattered around the world for almost two thousand years.

But God has been slowly restoring Israelites to their land during the past 100 years or so. And when Jesus comes back to set up his earthly kingdom, they’re going to be restored spiritually as well. They’re going to turn to him in faith and be cleansed from all their sin. He’s going to remove their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. Instead of being stubborn and rebellious, they will love and obey God. So Ezekiel 36 is talking about the salvation of unbelieving Israelites. But in Psalm 51 we’re looking at a man who was already saved. David had already received a new heart when God forgave him judicially. He wasn’t asking God to start from scratch and create a brand new heart for him. He didn’t need justification; he needed sanctification. He wanted God to transform him from the inside out and make him more holy.

So when David asked God in Psalm 51:10 to create a clean heart for him, he wasn’t talking about instantaneous creation from nothing. Instead he was asking God to take the new heart he already had and make it cleaner than it was. You see, when we receive a new heart at salvation, we’re not perfect. We still sin occasionally, and so we need God to change us and make us more pure. And it doesn’t happen in a moment; it’s a process that will continue until we die or Jesus comes back to bring us home. We see confirmation of this view when we look at the second half of verse 10. David didn’t just ask God to create a clean heart for him. He also wrote, “And renew a steadfast spirit within me.” The word “and” just shows that these two requests are linked closely together. The second request is parallel to the first one and helps us to understand it. Another way to ask God to create a clean heart for him was to ask God to renew a steadfast spirit within him.

The Hebrew word for renew is used only 10 times in the Old Testament. And the main idea with this word is repairing or renovating something. For example, 2 Chronicles 15:8 tells us that King Asa “renovated the altar of the LORD.” And 2 Chronicles 24:4 says that King Joash decided “to renovate the LORD’s temple.” So we have confirmation here that David didn’t need a brand new heart in Psalm 51. Instead he needed a repaired or renovated heart. But David switched from talking about a clean heart to a steadfast spirit at the end of verse 10. The Hebrew word for spirit sometimes just means “wind” or “breath.” It’s used in Psalm 1:4, which says that the wicked “are like chaff that the wind blows away.” It’s also found in Psalm 33:6, which states that “the heavens were made by the word of the LORD, and all the stars, by the breath of his mouth.”

But this Hebrew word also refers regularly to a human spirit, which is the immaterial part of a person. In Psalm 32:2 David wrote, “How joyful is a person whom the LORD does not charge with iniquity and in whose spirit is no deceit.” That verse is talking about the spirit of a person who honestly confesses his sin and receives forgiveness. And David was using this Hebrew word in the same way here in Psalm 51:10. He was talking about his inner person, just like he was when he used the word “heart.” And he emphasized these parallel terms by putting them first in the original Hebrew text of each statement here. In each request he was stressing the importance of his innermost being.

But at the end of the verse David added even more emphasis to his inner person by including the phrase “within me.” A more literal translation is the phrase “in my inward parts.” The Hebrew word here is used in Genesis 25:22 to refer to the place where Jacob and Esau lived before they were born. They were in their Rebekah’s inward parts or her womb. But this Hebrew word can also be used figuratively to refer to our immaterial being. It’s found in Zechariah 12:1, which says that God “formed the spirit of man within him.” And it’s also used in Ezekiel 36:26, which we read earlier. There God said, “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you.” Both of these verses have the same Hebrew word for spirit that David used in Psalm 51:10. All three passages are emphasizing that our spirit is within us.

But David didn’t just ask God to renew his spirit within him. He asked God to renew a steadfast spirit within him. The Hebrew word for steadfast can have different nuances depending on the context. In Exodus 8:26 Moses told Pharaoh that “it would not be right” to stay in Egypt and offer sacrifices there. The word “right” there comes from the same Hebrew term that David used in Psalm 51:10. This is the word that’s found in the King James Version, and so it’s part of the song that Keith Green wrote. It’s also used in the English Standard Version. But the more common meaning for this Hebrew word is the idea of being established. In 2 Samuel 7:16 God told David, “Your house and kingdom will endure before me forever, and your throne will be established forever.” The idea here is that David’s kingdom had a firm foundation. It would be reliable and dependable in the sense that it would last.

And this concept makes a lot of sense in Psalm 51:10. That’s why most translations have the word “steadfast” like the Christian Standard Bible has. David was probably focused on his desire to be faithful and committed to the Lord. And he needed God’s help to do that. That’s why he asked God to renew a steadfast spirit within him. He had a spiritual lapse when he sinned with Bathsheba, but with God’s help he could recover and resume growing spiritually. So this verse reminds us that when we sin, the root of our

problem is inside us. That's what Jesus taught in Matthew 5:19 when he said that "from the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, sexual immoralities, thefts, false testimonies, slander." Did you notice that David's two major sins are listed together there? It's no wonder that Solomon told us in Proverbs 4:23 to "guard your heart above all else, for it is the source of life." Let's close in prayer and ask for God's help to guard our hearts against sin.