

# PSALM 51:11

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Turn in your Bibles to Psalm 51. Last week we began looking at the second section in this psalm, which is found in verses 10–17. The focus in this section is on the theme of restoration. In verses 1–9 we saw the theme of confession. David was confessing his sin and asking God to forgive him. Now in verses 10–17 we’re seeing David ask for restoration. And in the first three verses of this section, we have one of the most memorable parts of this psalm. That’s because the words of these verses in the King James Version were set to music by the Christian singer and songwriter Keith Green. It was sung regularly in churches back 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. 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 study these verses carefully.

Last week we looked at verse 10, where David wrote, “God, create a clean heart for me and renew a steadfast spirit within me.” In this verse we see two requests from David to God. Now in verses 1–9 we already saw a total of 10 requests. David’s focus there was on asking God to get rid of his sin. But in verse 10 David changed his focus. Instead of asking for something to be removed, he asked God to give him a clean heart and a steadfast spirit. He wanted his sin to be replaced by a stronger commitment to God. And he started by using the word “create.” The Hebrew verb here 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 in Isaiah 43:15. There God said, "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!

And so we should not rush to the conclusion that David was talking about instantaneous creation from nothing in Psalm 51:10. First we need to think about what he wanted God to create for him. He asked God for a clean heart. The Hebrew word for heart here points to the inner person, and normally the focus is on the mind and the will, not the emotions. But David's mind and his will were unclean because of his sin with Bathsheba. And so he asked God to create a clean heart for him. The Hebrew word for clean usually refers to ceremonial cleansing. But David's problem wasn't that he had a skin disease. Instead he was talking moral impurity here. He had sinned against God when he committed adultery with Bathsheba. That's why he needed God to create a clean heart for him.

So was David talking about creation from nothing here? 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? It's tempting to say "yes," especially because of a key parallel passage. Listen to what God told the Israelites in Ezekiel 36:25-26: "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." In this passage God was talking to his people during the Babylonian captivity. They were in exile because of their sin, and even God graciously released them from captivity, most of them continued to live in rebellion against God. They rejected Jesus as their Messiah during his first coming. But when he comes back to set up his earthly kingdom, they're going to turn to him in faith and be cleansed from all their sin. God'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 Psalm 51 was written by a man who was already saved. David wasn't asking God to start from scratch and create a brand new heart for him. He wanted God to take the new heart he already had and make it cleaner than it was. He didn't need justification, which happens in an instant. He needed sanctification, which is a lifelong process. And 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 asked God to renew a steadfast spirit within him. The Hebrew word for renew is used several times elsewhere to refer to repairing or renovating something. So David wasn't looking for a brand new heart but 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 here just refers to a human spirit, which is the immaterial part of a person. So once again David was talking about his inner person. He was using the words “heart” and “spirit” synonymously. 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. One of them is reflected by the word “right,” and that’s exactly what’s in the King James Version and in the song that Keith Green wrote.

But the more common meaning for this Hebrew word is the idea of being established. This nuance is found in 2 Samuel 7:16, where 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 the most sense in Psalm 51:10. That’s why most Bible translations have the word “steadfast.” 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.

Now let’s move on to verse 11 and cover some new material. Look at what David wrote in this verse: “Do not banish me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me.” In this verse we have two requests from David to God, just like we had in verse 10. But in verse 10 the requests were positive, and here in verse 11 they’re negative. In verse 10 David was asking God to do something, and here in verse 11 he asked God not to do something. The first thing that David asked God not to do was to banish him from God’s presence. The Hebrew word for banish is used about 100 times in the Old Testament, and it literally means “to throw.” It’s used in several prominent passages, like Genesis 37, which tells us about the tense relationship between Jacob’s sons. Joseph was Jacob’s favorite son, and as a result his brothers were jealous of him and hated him. One day Jacob sent Joseph to check on his brothers when they were caring for the flocks, and verse 24 says that “they took him and threw him into the pit.” Then of course they sold him into slavery.

This Hebrew word is also used several times in the book of Exodus. In the first part of the book, the focus is on how God delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. And God used Moses and his brother Aaron to do that. He sent them to the Pharaoh or the king of Egypt, and in Exodus 7:9 he told Aaron, “Take your staff and throw it down before Pharaoh. It will become a serpent.” This was one of the miracles that God used to demonstrate his power over the gods of Egypt. Then once God rescued his people from Egypt, he led them to Mount Sinai and gave them his laws for them. But it didn’t take long before they rebelled against him. Exodus 32 tells us that they had Aaron make a golden calf for them to worship while Moses was on the mountain receiving God’s laws and two stone tablets with the words of the Ten Commandments written on them. When Moses went down the mountain and saw the people sinning, Exodus 32:19 says that “Moses became enraged and threw the tablets out of his hands, smashing them at the base of the mountain.”

So we’ve read some prominent passages where our Hebrew verb is used literally. But this term is also used

figuratively on many occasions. Some of these passages are very encouraging, like Isaiah 38. In this chapter King Hezekiah became sick, and God told him that he was about to die. But this announcement was designed to provoke him to pray for mercy, and that's exactly what he did. So God granted his request and added 15 years to his life. And after Hezekiah recovered from his sickness, he wrote a poem. In Isaiah 38:17 he said to God, "Indeed, it was for my own well-being that I had such intense bitterness, but your love has delivered me from the Pit of destruction, for you have thrown all my sins behind your back." The idea here is that God took Hezekiah's sins and put them in a place where they were out of sight.

We have a similar passage in Micah 7. In this book Micah proclaimed that God would bring judgment on the Israelites because of their sin. But Micah also announced that one day God would save his people from their sins. As Micah brought his book to a close in chapter 7, he looked forward to this time of blessing, which will take place during the millennial kingdom. Listen to what he wrote in verses 18–19: "Who is a God like you, forgiving iniquity and passing over rebellion for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not hold on to his anger forever because he delights in faithful love. He will again have compassion on us; he will vanquish our iniquities. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea." That word "cast" comes from the same Hebrew term that we have in Psalm 51:11. So once again this word is used to picture God putting people's sins in a place where they were out of sight.

This term is also used in Psalm 55, which was also written by David. In this psalm David talked about the pain that he experienced when a close friend betrayed him. But he knew what to do in difficult situations like this one. In verse 22 he said, "Cast your burden on the LORD, and he will sustain you; he will never allow the righteous to be shaken." Once again the word "cast" comes from the same Hebrew term that we have in Psalm 51:11. David was saying that we can turn to God in prayer and receive his help whenever we're going through a hard time. The apostle Peter wrote something very similar in his first letter. In fact, it's very likely that he was thinking about this verse when he said these words in 1 Peter 5:6–7: "Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your cares on him, because he cares about you." Whenever we're tempted to worry about anything, we can take it to God in prayer. We can throw our burden on his shoulders and let him carry it for us.

So we've read some very positive verses that use the Hebrew word for throw in a figurative way. But there are also some pretty negative verses as well. In 2 Kings 17 we see that God sent the northern kingdom of Israel into captivity because of the people's sin. Here's what the writer said in verse 20: "So the LORD rejected all the descendants of Israel, punished them, and handed them over to plunderers until he had banished them from his presence." Then in 2 Kings 24 the same thing happened to the southern kingdom of Judah because of the people's sin. Verse 20 says, "Because of the LORD's anger, it came to the point in Jerusalem and Judah that he finally banished them from his presence." In both passages our Hebrew term is translated with the word "banished." These verses are talking about people being thrown out of God's presence as punishment for their sins. Of course God didn't literally throw them, but the term is used figuratively to communicate that he removed them from their land.

Now we're finally ready to return to Psalm 51:11. In this verse the Hebrew word for throw is translated

just like it was in these two passages in 2 Kings. And that makes sense, because in all three passages we have the same Hebrew word for presence. The Israelites were later banished from God's presence because of their sin, and David was facing a similar situation because of his sin. But he didn't want that to happen to him. And so he asked God, "Do not banish me from your presence." The Hebrew word for presence literally means "face." We already saw this word back in verse 9, where David asked God, "Turn your face away from my sins." Now of course God doesn't literally have a face, because John 4:24 says that "God is spirit." In other words, he doesn't have a physical body as part of his essential being. So David was using an anthropomorphism, which means that he attributed a human physical feature to God. And here in Psalm 51:11 David was stressing God's presence.

Now this doesn't mean that God is not omnipresent. Scripture teaches clearly that God is everywhere all the time. In Psalm 139:7 David himself asked God, "Where can I flee from your presence?" And the context clearly shows that the correct answer to this question is the word "nowhere." In Jeremiah 23:24 God asked, "Do I not fill the heavens and the earth?" And the obvious answer to this question is "yes." So why did David ask God not to banish him from his presence in Psalm 51:11? After all, isn't that impossible? The solution here is that David was talking about a special manifestation of God's presence. For the Israelites God revealed his presence in a special way at the tabernacle. So most likely David was talking about being unable to worship God at the tabernacle because of his sin. He didn't want to miss the joy of corporate worship, just like he already said back in verse 8.

So in the beginning of verse 11, David asked God, "Do not banish me from your presence." And then David added another request at the end of the verse. He wrote, "Or take your Holy Spirit from me." The Christian Standard Bible joins this request very closely to the first request. The phrase "do not" at the beginning of the verse actually governs both requests and not just the first one. But in the original Hebrew the word translated "not" actually appears in both statements. And the Hebrew conjunction that connects these two requests is normally translated with the word "and," not the word "or." The New American Standard Bible is more literal here. This translation has the statement "and do not take your Holy Spirit from me."

So in the first request David was talking about being removed from God's presence. But in the second request David gave the opposite perspective. He was talking about God removing his presence from David. He used the word "take," which normally has the idea of grasping something. But here it has the nuance of taking something away or removing something. If you're a parent, then you know all about removing things. I've lost track of how many times I've had to take something away from my kids. Sometimes they're not supposed to have the item at all, but other times I gave them permission to have it for a while, and they just don't want to let go of it when their time's up. So I have to remove it from their grasp by force. That's similar to what was going on with David and his heavenly Father. David didn't want God to remove his presence from him.

But at the end of verse 11 David referred to God's presence by using the phrase "your Holy Spirit." The Hebrew word for spirit is the same one that we just saw in verse 10. Sometimes it means "wind" or "breath," but in verse 10 it refers to a human spirit, which is the immaterial part of a person. David was

using the words “heart” and “spirit” synonymously to talk about his inner being. But here in verse 11 David wasn’t talking about his own spirit. Instead he was talking about God’s Spirit, and that’s why the word is capitalized in most of our Bible translations. David did the same thing in Psalm 143:10. There he asked God, “Teach me to do your will, for you are my God. May your gracious Spirit lead me on level ground.” In that verse David described God’s Spirit with a Hebrew word that literally means “good.”

But here in Psalm 51:11 David used the word “holy” to refer to God’s Spirit. The Hebrew word for holy refers to being separate from sin. It’s used over and over in Scripture to describe God. In Psalm 99 this word is used three times to refer to God. Verse 3 says, “Let them praise your great and awe-inspiring name. He is holy.” Verse 5 says, “Exalt the LORD our God; bow in worship at his footstool. He is holy.” Finally, verse 9 says, “Exalt the LORD our God; bow in worship at his holy mountain, for the LORD our God is holy.” But the most powerful passage that proclaims God’s holiness is found in Isaiah 6. In this chapter the prophet Isaiah had a vision of God seated on his throne in the temple. And in verse 3 he saw special angels called seraphim who called to one another and said, “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of Armies; his glory fills the whole earth.” There’s no place in Scripture where any other attribute of God is proclaimed three times in a row. We don’t see the phrase “love, love, love” or “grace, grace, grace.” But we do see the phrase “holy, holy, holy.” And so I think it’s safe to conclude that holiness is God’s most preeminent attribute.

But in Psalm 51:11 we don’t see a general reference to God’s holiness. Instead David was talking specifically about God’s Holy Spirit. The Hebrew words for holy and spirit appear together in only one other passage in the Old Testament. In Isaiah 63 we see the prophet Isaiah reflecting on God’s goodness to the Israelites. Listen to what Isaiah said about God in verses 9–13: “He redeemed them because of his love and compassion; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of the past. But they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit. So he became their enemy and fought against them. Then he remembered the days of the past, the days of Moses and his people. Where is he who brought them out of the sea with the shepherds of his flock? Where is he who put his Holy Spirit among the flock? He made his glorious strength available at the right hand of Moses, divided the water before them to make an eternal name for himself, and led them through the depths like a horse in the wilderness, so that they did not stumble.”

So we see the phrase “Holy Spirit” twice in this passage. In verse 10 Isaiah was focused on how the Israelites rebelled against God and grieved his Holy Spirit. Then in verse 11 he said that God put his Holy Spirit among the people to watch over them and protect them. And this passage provides the foundation for the New Testament teaching on the Holy Spirit. This phrase is used there a total of 90 times. And we can see clearly that the Holy Spirit is not just a force or a way of referring to God’s presence. The Spirit is a distinct person within the triune God. Matthew 28:19 says that we should baptize people “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” The Father, the Son, and the Spirit are viewed as being on the same level in that passage.

Now we may not see the phrase “Holy Spirit” very much in the Old Testament, but this doesn’t mean that we can’t learn much about him there. There are plenty of references to the Spirit in the Old Testament, starting in Genesis 1. Verse 1 says that “God created the heavens and the earth,” and then verse 2 says that

“the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters.” In other words, the Spirit was involved in creation. But perhaps the most important passage about the Spirit in the Old Testament is Ezekiel 36:27. Last week we looked at verse 26, where God promised to give the Israelites a new heart and put a new spirit within them. Then in verse 27 he said, “I will place my Spirit within you and cause you to follow my statutes and carefully observe my ordinances.”

So in Ezekiel 36:26–27 the focus switches from the human spirit to the Holy Spirit, just like we have in Psalm 51:10–11. And in Ezekiel 36:27 we see the wonderful promise that God’s Spirit would indwell the Israelites individually and permanently. But this promise applies to Christians as well. In 1 Corinthians 6:19–20 Paul said to the believers in Corinth, “Don’t you know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought at a price. So glorify God with your body.” So the Spirit lives in us, and his presence is God’s way of guaranteeing our salvation. Listen to what Paul wrote in Ephesians 1:13–14: “In him you also were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and when you believed. The Holy Spirit is the down payment of our inheritance, until the redemption of the possession, to the praise of his glory.”

But Old Testament believers did not enjoy this blessing of having the Spirit indwell them permanently. Instead we usually see statements about the Spirit coming on certain people to empower them for a limited time and a specific purpose. For example, in 1 Samuel 10:10 we see that “when Saul and his servant arrived at Gibeah, a group of prophets met him. Then the Spirit of God came powerfully on him, and he prophesied along with them.” Then in 1 Samuel 16 we see that the same thing happened with David. Verse 13 says that “Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers, and the Spirit of the LORD came powerfully on David from that day forward.” But then the very next verse says that “the Spirit of the LORD had left Saul.” That’s because God had rejected him from being king as a result of his disobedience.

So David knew that he was not guaranteed the Spirit’s indwelling presence on a permanent basis. That’s why he asked God in Psalm 51:11 not to take the Holy Spirit from him. He didn’t want what happened to Saul to happen to him as well. And I think it’s safe to say that God granted his request because he confessed his sin and received forgiveness. But this is not a request that we need to pray today. In John 14:16–17 Jesus said, “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever. He is the Spirit of truth.” So during the church age the Holy Spirit will never leave God’s people. This is the problem with Keith Green’s song that’s taken from Psalm 51. It’s taking a statement by an Old Testament believer and putting it in the mouths of New Testament believers, even though it doesn’t apply directly to us.

Now this doesn’t mean that we don’t hinder the Spirit’s work in our lives when we sin. In 1 Thessalonians 5:19 Paul warned us not to “stifle the Spirit.” God gave us the Spirit to transform us into the image of Jesus, but we need to make sure that we’re not fighting against him. In Ephesians 4:30 Paul told us that when we sin, we “grieve God’s Holy Spirit.” Because the Holy Spirit lives in us, we need to be holy as well. But we don’t need to be afraid that our sin will result in the Holy Spirit leaving us like he left

Saul. Once the Spirit begins to indwell us, he's never going to forsake us. When we sin against the Lord, he will convict us and lead us to confess our sin like he did with David. He will draw us back to the Lord and help us to grow spiritually. Let's close in prayer and thank God for giving us the gift of his indwelling Spirit.