

PSALM 51:12

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Turn in your Bibles to Psalm 51. We're currently working through the second section in this psalm, which is found in verses 10–17. Back in verses 1–9 we saw the theme of confession, and now here in verses 10–17 we're seeing the theme of 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. Now in general I like songs that have lyrics taken directly from Scripture. But there are some dangers that we face when we sing a passage of Scripture. 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.

Two weeks ago we looked at verse 10, where David made two requests to God. The first one was for God to create a clean heart for him. Now sometimes the Hebrew word for create refers to making something instantaneously out of nothing. But David was already saved, and so he 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 request in verse 10. David 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 David was talking about his inner person, just like he was when he used the Hebrew word for heart earlier in the verse. He was using these two words 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 King James Version has the word "right" here instead, and that's why it's in the song that Keith Green wrote. But the more common meaning for this Hebrew word is the idea of being established, and this nuance makes more sense here. 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. He had a spiritual lapse when he sinned with Bathsheba, but with God's help he could recover and resume growing spiritually.

Then last week we looked at verse 11, which has two more requests from David to God. 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 to refer to Joseph's brothers throwing him into a pit and Moses throwing the stone tablets with the Ten Commandments written on them.

But this term can also be used figuratively with the nuance of banishing someone. In 2 Kings 17:20 God banished the northern kingdom of Israel into exile, and then in 2 Kings 24:20 he banished the southern kingdom of Judah into exile. In both places this Hebrew word indicates that God removed the Israelites from their land because of their sin. And in Psalm 51:11 David was in a similar situation because of his sin. He was facing the possibility of being banished from God's presence. Now of course we know that God is omnipresent. Scripture teaches clearly that God is everywhere all the time. But David was talking about a special manifestation of God's presence. God revealed his presence in a special way at the tabernacle, and David didn't want to be excluded from corporate worship there.

Then the second thing that David asked God not to do in verse 11 was to take God's Holy Spirit from him. 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. But here David referred to God's presence by referring to his Holy Spirit. The Hebrew word for spirit is the same one that was just used in verse 10. 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. And David described God's Spirit with the word "holy."

Now we're quite familiar with the phrase "Holy Spirit," because it appears a total of 90 times in the New Testament. But in the Old Testament this phrase is not common at all; the only other place where it appears is Isaiah 63. And so the fact that David used it here in Psalm 51 is very significant. He was emphasizing the fact that God's Spirit is holy. The Hebrew word for holy refers to being separate from sin. It's used over and over in Scripture to describe God. The most powerful passage is Isaiah 6, where 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. 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. And when we look at the New Testament, 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. But as Christians we have a special relationship with the Holy Spirit, because he lives in us. In 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 Paul wrote, "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."

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, 1 Samuel 10:10 says 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 grow spiritually.

Now let’s move on to Psalm 51:12 and cover some new material. Look at what David wrote in this verse: “Restore the joy of your salvation to me, and sustain me by giving me a willing spirit.” In this verse we once again have two requests from David to God, just like we had in verses 10–11. And these requests are stated positively, just like the ones in verse 10. David was asking God to do some things for him. And the first thing that David requested was for God to restore the joy of his salvation to David. The Hebrew verb for restore is very common in the Old Testament. It’s used over a thousand times in a variety of stems. And in the regular stem this verb normally means “to return.” This is an action that we all do on a regular basis. For example, after church today, most of us will return home. We were there earlier, and before long we will go back. That’s the basic idea with this verb.

We see this nuance of the Hebrew verb in the story of the flood. In Genesis 8:8–9 Noah “sent out a dove to see whether the water on the earth’s surface had gone down, but the dove found no resting place for its foot. It returned to him in the ark because water covered the surface of the whole earth.” Noah sent out the dove a few more times, and verse 12 tells us that eventually “it did not return to him again.” This He-

brew verb is also used in Hosea 14:1 to refer to Israel's relationship with God. There the prophet Hosea said, "Israel, return to the LORD your God, for you have stumbled in your iniquity." The Israelites were living in sin and rebellion against God. In a sense they walked away from him, and so Hosea called the people to repent and return to him.

But in Psalm 51:12 David used this Hebrew verb in the hiphil stem and not the regular stem. Normally the hiphil stem has the nuance of causing someone to do something. And so with our verb it has the idea of causing someone to return. We see this nuance in Genesis 28, which tells us about Jacob's trip to his uncle's house. In verse 15 God said, "Look, I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go. I will bring you back to this land." So Jacob was in the process of leaving the land of Canaan, but God said that one day he would cause Jacob to return. And this is the same basic nuance that we have in Psalm 51:12. But David wasn't asking God to cause him to return somewhere. Instead he was asking God to cause joy to return to him.

Now the Christian Standard Bible and most other translations have the word "restore" here instead of the word "return." But these two terms are very similar in meaning; they're essentially synonymous. After all, when we restore something, we're returning it to its original condition. When my wife and I were dating, we worked on a restoration project together. Somehow she got her hands on an antique cabinet that holds sheet music. But this thing was in pretty rough shape, and so we worked for many hours to make it look nice again. I can still remember all the time that we spent painting the intricate details on this cabinet. But eventually it looked pretty much brand new again. And we still have this cabinet today; it's sitting in our living room with some sheet music in it.

So this is a good illustration of what David was requesting when he asked God to restore joy to him. The idea is that David had been joyful in the past, but he wasn't experiencing joy at that time. The Hebrew word for joy here is the same one that we already saw back in verse 8. There David asked God to let him "hear joy and gladness." He was talking about hearing the joy of his fellow believers as they worshiped God together at the tabernacle. But here in verse 12 David was talking about his own joy. And this time he wasn't talking about the joy of corporate worship. Instead he was talking about the joy of God's salvation. The Hebrew word for salvation is used 36 times in the Old Testament, and 20 of those occurrences are found in the Book of Psalms. And what we see in this book is that there's often a strong connection between salvation and God.

Let's do a quick survey of a few passages that David wrote about God's salvation in the Book of Psalms. Look at what he wrote in Psalm 18:46: "The LORD lives—blessed be my rock! The God of my salvation is exalted." David exalted God as the one who gave him salvation. Now look at what David said in Psalm 25:5: "Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; I wait for you all day long." David knew that he could wait patiently for God to save him from his enemies. Finally, let's look at a few verses in Psalm 27. In verse 1 David wrote, "The LORD is my light and my salvation—whom should I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life—whom should I dread?" David knew that he didn't need to be afraid of anyone, because God was watching over him. Then in verse 9 David said, "Do not hide your face from me; do not turn your servant away in anger. You have been my helper; do not leave me or

abandon me, God of my salvation.” David asked the God of his salvation to keep protecting him from his enemies.

Now when we see the word “salvation” in Scripture, we tend to think of it in a purely spiritual sense. And certainly that’s the normal meaning of this term when it’s found in the New Testament. But in the Old Testament the Hebrew word for salvation is usually focused on physical deliverance. That was true in the verses we just read, and we can see this nuance in other passages as well. Look at Psalm 12:5: “Because of the devastation of the needy and the groaning of the poor, I will now rise up,” says the LORD. ‘I will provide safety for the one who longs for it.’” The Hebrew word for safety there is the same one that David used in Psalm 51:12. We also see this word used with a similar meaning in Psalm 44. Look at what the psalmist wrote in verses 4–5: “You are my King, my God, who ordains victories for Jacob. Through you we drive back our foes; through your name we trample our enemies.” The word “victories” in verse 4 is the one that comes from our Hebrew term. And we can see from the context in verse 5 that the focus here is clearly on physical deliverance.

But in Psalm 51:12 the Hebrew word for salvation does not seem to be referring to physical deliverance. There’s no reference in this psalm to any enemies that David was dealing with. And we know from 2 Samuel that David was experiencing military success around the time that he committed adultery with Bathsheba. So I believe that David was talking about spiritual salvation in this psalm. He was referring to being saved from the punishment of his sin. After all, he was focused on confessing his sin in the first nine verses. He understood the truth of what Paul later wrote in Romans 6:23: “The wages of sin is death.” And that verse is not referring primarily to physical death but to spiritual death or eternal separation from God in hell.

But this doesn’t mean that David thought he had lost his salvation. We shouldn’t even conclude that David thought it was possible for him to lose his salvation. Now in verse 11 he did acknowledge the possibility that God would take the Holy Spirit away from him. But under the old covenant believers could lose the Spirit’s presence without losing their salvation. Their salvation was secure just like ours is today. So David didn’t need God to restore salvation to him. Instead he was asking God in verse 12 to restore the joy of salvation. Because of the terrible sins he had committed against the Lord, he was unable to rejoice in the fact that he was saved. That’s because his relationship with God had been affected by his sin. He had been already forgiven judicially, but he still needed parental forgiveness.

So what we see here is how miserable it is to be living in unrepentant sin. The world deceives us into thinking that we’ll be happier if we indulge in sin. But sin brings only superficial and temporary pleasure. We won’t find ultimate satisfaction by going against God’s will for our lives. Now unbelievers might be able to fool themselves for a while into thinking that sin brings joy. But as Christians we have the Holy Spirit living in us, and his presence in our lives means that we feel the full weight of his convicting work when we sin. As David said back in verse 3, he was always conscious of his rebellion, and his sin was always before him. And so he needed to confess his sin and ask God to restore the joy of salvation to him. As long as we keep clinging to our sin like David did for a while, we won’t experience joy. We need to repent as soon as possible and ask God to restore our joy.

Now let's look at the second thing that David requested from God in verse 12. He wrote, "And sustain me by giving me a willing spirit." This is where Keith Green's song takes a strange turn. The end of the song doesn't reflect this request at all. Instead Keith repeated the second half of verse 10: "And renew a right spirit within me." What this means is that the statement at the end of verse 12 is probably the most unfamiliar part of verses 10–12 for most of you. So let's take a careful look at this request for God to sustain David. The Hebrew verb for sustain is used 48 times in the Old Testament, and it literally means "to lean on someone or something." It's used with this nuance in Judges 16:29, which tells us that "Samson took hold of the two middle pillars supporting the temple and leaned against them, one on his right hand and the other on his left." And of course you know what happened next. Samson pushed on the pillars, and the building collapsed. Samson died at that moment, but he took out a bunch of Philistines at the same time.

But the most common meaning for this Hebrew verb has to do with laying hands on a sacrificial animal. It's used over a dozen times in the book of Leviticus with this nuance. Listen to God's instructions in Leviticus 16:21 about what to do on the Day of Atonement: "Aaron will lay both his hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the Israelites' iniquities and rebellious acts—all their sins. He is to put them on the goat's head and send it away into the wilderness by the man appointed for the task." So what was going on here was that the high priest would lay his hands on the head of the goat. And this action signified the transfer of guilt for sin from the Israelites to the goat. Then the goat would carry their sins into the wilderness. This was a picture that pointed forward to Jesus and his death on the cross when our sins were transferred to him.

But this Hebrew verb can also have the idea of supporting or sustaining someone. That's how David used it in Psalm 3:5. Listen to what he wrote there: "I lie down and sleep; I wake again because the LORD sustains me." We see the same nuance in Psalm 37:17. In that verse David said, "For the arms of the wicked will be broken, but the LORD sustains the righteous." And this is the meaning that David intended in Psalm 51:12 as well. David knew that God supports and sustains the righteous, but he hadn't been behaving very righteously! And so he needed to confess his sin and ask God to continue to sustain him, even though he didn't deserve it.

But David didn't just ask God to sustain him. He indicated how he wanted God to sustain him. He wrote, "Sustain me by giving me a willing spirit." The phrase "by giving me" in the Christian Standard Bible doesn't actually come from the Hebrew text. The English Standard Version and the New American Standard Bible have the word "with" here, which is a more literal translation. It shows that this request is more ambiguous than the way it seems to be in the Christian Standard Bible. There is some uncertainty about what David meant by the word "spirit." The Hebrew word for spirit here is the same one that we've already seen in the previous two verses. In verse 10 it refers to David's spirit or the immaterial part of his being. But in verse 11 it refers to God's Holy Spirit or the third member of the Trinity.

So what is the nuance of this word here in verse 12? To answer that question we need to look at the adjective that modifies this term. The Christian Standard Bible has the word "willing," and so do most Bible translations. The Hebrew word here is used 26 times in the Old Testament, and it usually refers to nobles.

These are people who have a high social status and are sometimes leaders as well. We see this nuance in Psalm 107:40, which says that God “pours contempt on nobles and makes them wander in a trackless wasteland.” Apparently many nobles did not fear God, but thankfully that wasn’t true about all nobles. Psalm 47:9 says, “The nobles of the peoples have assembled with the people of the God of Abraham. For the leaders of the earth belong to God; he is greatly exalted.”

But in several passages this Hebrew word has the idea of being ready and willing to do something. It’s used twice in Exodus 35 with this meaning. In this chapter we see the first stage of the construction of the tabernacle. Listen to what Moses told the Israelites to do in verse 5: “Take up an offering among you for the LORD. Let everyone whose heart is willing bring this as the LORD’s offering: gold, silver, and bronze.” Moses went on to list a variety of other items in the following verses. But the point here is that Moses wasn’t giving a requirement to the people. He said that only people who had willing hearts were to contribute to the construction of the tabernacle. And verse 22 shows us that this is exactly what happened: “Both men and women came; all who had willing hearts brought brooches, earrings, rings, necklaces, and all kinds of gold jewelry—everyone who presented a presentation offering of gold to the LORD.”

And this nuance of willingness seems to be the correct idea in Psalm 51:12. But there are a few Bible translations that take a different approach here. The New King James Version has the phrase, “And uphold me by Your generous Spirit.” And the word “generous” is certainly connected to the concept of willingness in Exodus 35. But the problem here is that there is no Hebrew second person pronoun connected with the word for spirit. Verse 11 has a pronoun, and that’s why we see a reference to God’s Spirit there. But in verse 12 I don’t think that’s the best interpretation. I believe the Christian Standard Bible and most translations are correct not to capitalize the word “spirit” in this verse. David was probably referring to his spirit, not the Holy Spirit. He was asking God to transform his immaterial being so that he would be willing to live in obedience.

You see, when David sinned with Bathsheba, he showed that he was more interested in disobeying God than obeying him. In Psalm 40:8 David said, “I delight to do your will, my God.” But on this occasion his willingness to live righteously was not very strong. He gave in to temptation pretty easily. And the same thing can happen to us. Our enthusiasm for doing God’s will tends to go up and down. And when it’s low, we need to follow David’s example and ask God to sustain us by giving us a willing spirit. But thankfully this is a request that God is happy to grant. Philippians 2:13 says that God “is working in you both to will and work according to his good purpose.” Let’s pray and ask God to make us willing to live in obedience to him.