

PSALM 51:13

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Turn in your Bibles to Psalm 51. We've been working our way 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 here in verses 10–17 we're seeing the theme of restoration. So far we've covered verses 10–12, where we saw one of the most memorable parts of this psalm. That's because these verses were set to music by the Christian singer and songwriter Keith Green. So before we jump into verse 13, let's review these important verses. In verse 10 David made two requests to God, and 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 he switched from the word "heart" to the word "spirit." The Hebrew word for spirit here just refers to a human spirit, which is the immaterial part of a person. So with both words David was talking about his inner person. 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 normally has the idea of being established. 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 in verse 11 David made two additional requests to God. But here David switched from positive to negative requests. In verse 10 David was asking God to do something, and in verse 11 he asked God not to do something. And the first thing that David asked God not to do was to banish him from God's presence. The Hebrew word for banish literally means "to throw," but it can also be used figuratively with the nuance of removing or banishing someone. David was facing the possibility of being banished from God's presence because of his sin. Now of course David knew that there was nowhere he could go to escape God's presence. That's because God is omnipresent; in other words, he is everywhere at all times. But here 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 we just saw 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 "Spirit" is capitalized in most of our Bible translations. David was talking about the third member of the Trinity. And he used the word "Holy" to stress that the Spirit is completely separate from sin.

But even though the Spirit is holy, he lives inside us. In 1 Corinthians 6:19 Paul said that Christians are the "temple of the Holy Spirit," and in Ephesians 1:14 he said that "the Holy Spirit is the down payment of our inheritance." But Old Testament believers did not enjoy this blessing of having the Spirit indwell them permanently. Instead the Spirit would usually come on certain people to empower them for a limited time and a specific purpose. That's what happened to King Saul, but then later the Spirit left him. 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. But this is not a request that we need to pray today as New Testament believers. During the church age the Holy Spirit will never stop living in God's people. The Spirit is certainly grieved when we sin, but we don't need to be afraid that he will ever leave us.

Then in verse 12 David made two more requests to God. And this time they 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 he requested was for God to restore the joy of his salvation to David. The Hebrew verb for restore normally means "to return." So David was asking God to cause joy to return to him. David had been joyful in the past, but he wasn't experiencing joy at that time. He wanted to be restored to a joyful state. And more specifically, he wanted to experience the joy of God's salvation. Now the Hebrew word for salvation normally refers to physical deliverance. But here the focus seems to be on spiritual salvation. He was talking about being saved from the punishment of his sin. After all, he was focused on confessing his sin in the first nine verses.

But this doesn't mean that David thought he had lost his salvation. He wasn't asking God to restore salvation to him but 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. 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.

Then the second thing that David requested in verse 12 was for God to sustain him by giving him a willing spirit. The Hebrew word for sustain can have different nuances, but here it has the idea of supporting someone. David also used this word in Psalm 37:17, where he said that "the arms of the wicked will be

broken, but the LORD sustains the righteous.” So 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 keep sustaining 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 asked God to sustain him by giving him a willing spirit. The Hebrew word for spirit 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.

Now some Bible scholars believe that David was talking about God’s Spirit in verse 12 as well. But in the original text there’s no Hebrew second person pronoun connected to the word for spirit like there is in verse 11. So in verse 12 David was probably referring to his spirit like he was in verse 10. 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. David’s willingness to live righteously was not very strong. That’s why he gave in to temptation so 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.

Now let’s move on to verse 13 and cover some new material. Look at what David wrote in Psalm 51:13: “Then I will teach the rebellious your ways, and sinners will return to you.” The first word here in the Christian Standard Bible is the word “then.” And the same thing is true with every other major conservative Bible translation. But what’s interesting here is that there is no corresponding word in the original Hebrew text. So why is the word “then” in all these Bible translations? I think the answer is that it seems to capture David’s train of thought in this psalm. In verses 10–12 he made a series of six requests to God, but in verse 13 we don’t have any requests. Instead David was making a commitment to do something. Most likely he was talking about what he would do once his requests in verses 10–12 were granted. And the word “then” helps to communicate this idea.

So let’s take a look at what David resolved to do in verse 13. He said that he would teach the rebellious God’s ways. The Hebrew word for teach is a verb in the piel stem. But in the regular stem, which is known as the qal stem, this verb actually means “to learn.” We can see several examples of this nuance in Psalm 119. Look at what the writer said to God in verse 7: “I will praise you with an upright heart when I learn your righteous judgments.” When the psalmist learned more about God, he would respond with praise. Then in verse 73 the writer again said to God, “Your hands made me and formed me; give me understanding so that I can learn your commands.” So the psalmist wanted to learn God’s commands, but he knew that he needed God’s help.

We also see this Hebrew verb used in the regular stem in Deuteronomy 31. In this book Moses was reminding the Israelites about God’s laws for them right before they entered into the land of Canaan. And what he told them in this chapter is that every seven years they were supposed to gather together and have God’s laws read to them. Look at the instructions Moses gave in verse 12: “Gather the people—men, women, dependents, and the resident aliens within your city gates—so that they may listen and learn to

fear the LORD your God and be careful to follow all the words of this law.” So the purpose of listening to God’s laws was to learn to do two things, and the first one was to fear God. The people were not to have a cavalier attitude toward God. Instead they needed to have an attitude of reverence toward him. Then they would be prepared to do the second thing here. They would be ready to learn to obey all the laws that they were hearing.

But the Hebrew word for learn doesn’t always have this meaning. When this verb is used in the piel stem, it means “to teach.” And obviously these concepts are closely related. After all, teaching leads to learning. When someone teaches effectively, the audience normally learns what is being taught. And there’s no teacher who is more effective than God. Look at what David wrote in Psalm 25:4–5: “Make your ways known to me, LORD; teach me your paths. Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; I wait for you all day long.” David undoubtedly had human teachers like the priests, but he knew that ultimately he needed God to teach him. Only then could he truly understand God and his truth.

And we see the same attitude from other writers who contributed to this book. Look at what the psalmist wrote in Psalm 119:11–12: “I have treasured your word in my heart so that I may not sin against you. LORD, may you be blessed; teach me your statutes.” So the psalmist memorized God’s word, but he knew that he still needed God to teach him so that he would understand and apply it. And when God teaches us, the result is great joy and blessing. Look at what the psalmist wrote in Psalm 94:12: “LORD, how happy is anyone you discipline and teach from your law.” So sometimes we need God’s discipline because of our sin. But one of the ways that he corrects us is by teaching us his laws. And when God helps us to understand his word, it brings a special joy into our lives.

But David knew that God often uses people to teach us his truth. And David wanted God to use him to teach others. First he needed to confess his sin and receive forgiveness. Then he would be restored to fellowship with God and would be useful in God’s service again. And one of the ways that he wanted to serve God was by teaching people about God. That’s what his focus was in Psalm 51:13. But in this verse he described the audience of his teaching. He said that he would teach the rebellious. The Hebrew word for rebellious comes from the same root as a term that David used earlier in this psalm. In verses 1 and 3 we saw the word “rebellion,” and in each case the Hebrew word comes from the same root as our term here in verse 13.

This Hebrew word for rebellious is a very strong term that refers to willful defiance. It’s not talking about something done by accident. Instead it refers to purposely revolting against God and rejecting his authority. It indicates a strong defiance of God’s will for our lives. Now in verses 1 and 3 David was referring to his own rebellion, but here in verse 13 he was talking about the rebellion of others. David had confessed his rebellion to God, and once he was forgiven, he wanted to help people who were still in rebellion against God and were living the way he used to live. And the way that he would do that was by teaching them God’s ways.

The Hebrew word for ways literally refers to a road or a path. That’s how this term is used in Exodus 13.

In the previous chapters God unleashed a series of ten plagues on the Egyptians because Pharaoh refused to release the Israelites from slavery. But after the deadly tenth plague in which God killed all the first-born in Egypt, Pharaoh finally let the Israelites go. And look at how God led the people out of Egypt in verses 17–18: “When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them along the road to the land of the Philistines, even though it was nearby; for God said, ‘The people will change their minds and return to Egypt if they face war.’ So he led the people around toward the Red Sea along the road of the wilderness. And the Israelites left the land of Egypt in battle formation.” So our Hebrew word is used here twice. First it refers to the road that led to the land of the Philistines, and then it refers to the road that led through the wilderness to the Red Sea.

But this Hebrew word can also be used figuratively in reference to a person’s conduct or behavior. That’s how David used the word in Psalm 103. Look at what he said about God in verse 7: “He revealed his ways to Moses, his deeds to the people of Israel.” Notice that the word “ways” is in parallel with the word “deeds.” These two words are being used synonymously here. In other words, when David was talking about God’s ways, he was referring to God’s deeds. We see a similar statement in Psalm 145. Look at what David wrote in verse 17: “The LORD is righteous in all his ways and faithful in all his acts.” Once again we have two parallel statements here, and this time the word “ways” is synonymous with the word “acts.” David was using the Hebrew word for ways figuratively to refer to God’s actions. And that’s probably how David was using this word in Psalm 51:13 as well.

But in our passage I think we can zoom in on a particular act that God does. David was basically asking God to forgive him in this psalm, and so it’s likely that he was referring primarily to God’s forgiveness. David wanted to teach the rebellious that they could be forgiven by God just like he was. Now when we looked at the first few verses of this psalm, I pointed out that David borrowed quite a few words from a key Old Testament passage where God revealed himself to Moses. And I think it’s appropriate to look at that passage again, because I’m inclined to believe that it would have been David’s key passage in his teaching about forgiveness.

So let’s look at what God said to Moses about himself in Exodus 34:6–7: “The LORD—the LORD is a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in faithful love and truth, maintaining faithful love to a thousand generations, forgiving iniquity, rebellion, and sin. But he will not leave the guilty unpunished, bringing the fathers’ iniquity on the children and grandchildren to the third and fourth generation.” So God clearly stated here that he is a gracious and loving God who forgives rebellion. But this doesn’t mean that he forgives everyone. He also said that he punishes the guilty. So how does he decide whom to forgive and whom to punish? The answer is found in 1 John 1:9, which says that “if we confess our sins [to God], he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” And that’s exactly what David did in Psalm 51. He confessed his sins to God and taught us by example how to receive forgiveness.

So in verse 13 David started by committing himself to teaching the rebellious God’s ways. And then he ended this verse by presenting the results of his commitment. He said that sinners would return to God. The Hebrew word for sinners comes from the same root as a term that David used earlier in this psalm.

In verses 2–3 we saw the word “sin,” and in each case the Hebrew word comes from the same root as our term here in verse 13. This Hebrew root means “to miss a mark or a goal.” The verb with this root is used in Judges 20:16, which mentions that some troops from the tribe of Benjamin “could sling a stone at a hair and not miss.” That’s some pretty fantastic aiming right there! But in a spiritual sense our aim is far from being that good. That’s because we all miss the mark of God’s perfect standard. Romans 3:23 tells us that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

Now in Psalm 51:2–3 David was referring to his own sin, but in verse 13 he was talking about the sin of others. David had confessed his sin to God, and once he was forgiven, he wanted to help people who were still in sin like he used to be. And when he taught them God’s ways, he was confident that at least some of them would return to God. The Hebrew word for return is the same one that we just saw in verse 12. There it’s translated with the word “restore,” but as I said during the review time, this Hebrew term normally just 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 can see this nuance of the verb clearly in Hosea 14:1, which refers 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.” At that time most of the Israelites were living in sin and rebellion against God. In a sense they walked away from him, and so Hosea called the people as a whole to return to him. But in Psalm 51:13 David was talking about sinners as individuals. And maybe some of them were like him and were already saved. So they just needed to return to God like David did. But I really doubt that David only wanted to teach people who were already saved. I suspect he wanted to teach unbelievers about God’s ways as well. And these people couldn’t return to God, because they never had a relationship with him in the first place.

But the Hebrew word for return doesn’t always have this nuance. Sometimes it simply means “to turn.” That’s how it’s used in Jonah 3. When Jonah preached about God’s coming judgment to the people of Nineveh, his words had a powerful effect. Look at what the king of Nineveh commanded his people to do in verse 8: “Furthermore, both people and animals must be covered with sackcloth, and everyone must call out earnestly to God. Each must turn from his evil ways and from his wrongdoing.” The Hebrew word for turn there is the same term that David used in Psalm 51:13. And I think it has the same meaning in both places. In Jonah 3 the focus is on turning away from sin, and in Psalm 51 the focus is on turning toward God. But the idea is just turning to God and not necessarily returning to God.

By the way, we have a theological term that summarizes the idea of turning away from sin and turning toward God. I’m talking about the doctrine of repentance. Unfortunately some people think that repentance is not necessary for salvation. They say that all we need to do is believe in Jesus to be saved. But repentance and faith are like two sides to the same coin. You can’t have one without the other. That’s why we see them together in Scripture on several occasions. In Mark 1:15 Jesus told people to “repent and believe the good news.” In Acts 20:21 Paul said, “I testified to both Jews and Greeks about repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus.”

So it's not good enough to believe that Jesus died on the cross for our sins and trust in him to save us. If we're still clinging to our sins, then it's impossible to have genuine faith in Jesus. We must renounce our sins and turn away from them if we're going to turn toward God. That's because God is holy and completely separate from sin. God and sin are in totally opposite directions. We can't move toward both of them at the same time. God won't forgive our sins unless we confess them and turn away from them. And that's what David was focused on doing in Psalm 51:13. Once he was forgiven, he wanted to teach the rebellious God's ways so that they would turn away from their sin and turn to God. Then they would receive forgiveness as well. This is one of the ways that God used David's evil for good. God helped David to learn from his sin so that he could help others with their sin.

And of course David wasn't the only person in Scripture whom God used in this way. One of the most prominent examples in the New Testament is the apostle Peter. When Jesus predicted in Luke 22 that Peter would deny him three times, he had some encouraging words for Peter as well. In verse 32 he said, "I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And you, when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers." So Jesus assured Peter that his faith would not disappear completely. And Jesus told Peter that he would recover from his failure. He would turn back to Jesus. And once he did that, he needed to strengthen his brothers. God would use Peter's sin to help him become a better leader and shepherd. He would be able to help his fellow Christians overcome sin in their lives.

So what we can see in the lives of both David and Peter is that once God has forgiven us, we have a duty to the people around us. First of all, we need to help our fellow believers when they've fallen into sin. We need to encourage them to repent and return to the Lord. Listen to what Paul said in Galatians 6:1: "Brothers and sisters, if someone is overtaken in any wrongdoing, you who are spiritual, restore such a person with a gentle spirit, watching out for yourselves so that you also won't be tempted." But we also need to reach out to unbelievers and share the gospel with them. We need to urge them to turn away from their sin and turn to God. We need to call on them to put their faith in Jesus as their Lord and Savior. The fact that we've been forgiven should motivate us to tell people around us how they can be forgiven as well. Let's close in prayer and ask God to give us the boldness to tell others about him.