

PSALM 51:14–15

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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. In verses 10–12 David made six requests to God, and in these requests he was basically asking God to help him grow spiritually. He asked for a steadfast and willing spirit to live in obedience to God. But in verse 13 David didn't make any requests to God. Instead he made a commitment to do something for God. He was probably talking about what he would do once his requests in verses 10–12 were granted. And what he said that he would do was to teach the rebellious God's ways.

The Hebrew word for teach is used regularly in the Book of Psalms, and on many occasions it refers to God. For example, listen to what David asked God to do 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 knew that if he was going to understand God's truth, he needed God to teach him. But David also knew that God often uses people to teach us his truth. And David wanted God to use him to teach others. Once he received forgiveness from God, 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 went on to specify the audience of his teaching. He said that he would teach the rebellious. The 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 persistent refusal to live in obedience to God's will for our lives. Now back in verses 1 and 3 David used a different word from this Hebrew root to describe his own rebellion against God. 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 like he used to live. And the way that he would help them was by teaching them God's ways.

The Hebrew word for ways literally refers to a road or a path. But it can also be used figuratively in reference to a person's conduct or behavior. That's how David used the word in Psalm 145:17. There he said, "The LORD is righteous in all his ways and faithful in all his acts." There are two parallel statements here, and the second one elaborates on the first one. So David was using the Hebrew word for ways to refer to God's acts. And that's probably how he 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.

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 a root that means "to miss a mark or a goal." And here it's referring to missing the mark of God's perfect standard. Just imagine throwing darts at a dart board and coming up short every time. Now back in verses 2–3 David used a different word from this Hebrew root to describe his own sin against God. But here in verse 13 he was talking about the sin of others, just as we saw with the Hebrew word for rebellion. So once David confessed his sin to God and received forgiveness, 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 literally refers to going back to a place where you used to be. Or it could refer to going back to a person you used to have a relationship with. In Hosea 14:1 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 3:8, where the king of Nineveh said to his people that "each must turn from his evil ways and from his wrongdoing." And I suspect that David intended this meaning in Psalm 51:13. In Jonah 3 the focus is on turning away from sin, and in Psalm 51 the focus is on turning toward God. What David was talking about here was the doctrine of repentance. The New Testament teaches that both repentance and faith are necessary for salvation. If we're still clinging to our sins, then it's impossible to have genuine trust in Jesus. 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.

So David 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 like David did. 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 the same thing is true for us today. 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. 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.

Now let's move on to Psalm 51:14 and cover some new material. Look at what David wrote in this verse: "Save me from the guilt of bloodshed, God—God of my salvation—and my tongue will sing of your righteousness." Here we have another request from David to God. It's the seventeenth one that we've seen so far in this psalm, and we still have a few more to go. What David asked for here was for God to save him. The Hebrew word for save basically just means "to take someone or something." For example, in Genesis 31:9 Jacob said to his wives, "God has taken away your father's herds and given them to me." And listen to what the psalmist said to God in Psalm 119:43: "Never take the word of truth from my mouth, for I hope in your judgments."

But normally this Hebrew word has the nuance of taking someone out of danger. And so it's usually translated in the Christian Standard Bible with the word "rescue." Look at what David wrote in Psalm 59:1–2: "Rescue me from my enemies, my God; protect me from those who rise up against me. Rescue me from those who practice sin, and save me from men of bloodshed." So in these verses David was asking God for physical deliverance. And that's the normal focus of this Hebrew word. But sometimes it goes deeper and has the nuance of spiritual deliverance. Look at what David wrote in Psalm 39:8: "Rescue me from all my transgressions; do not make me the taunt of fools." David was asking God to deliver him from the punishment of his sins.

But what kind of deliverance was David talking about in Psalm 51:14? I think the answer becomes clear as we keep studying this verse. The Christian Standard Bible says, "Save me from the guilt of bloodshed." But a more literal translation is the phrase "deliver me from bloods." There is no Hebrew word here for guilt, and the Hebrew word for bloodshed is in the plural, probably to stress a large amount of blood. But of course a literal translation here doesn't make much sense. Surely David wasn't afraid that someone would throw a bucket of blood at him! But perhaps he was afraid that people would try to shed his blood and kill him. And so in this case his request here was for God to protect him from those people.

Now this interpretation is popular among liberal Bible scholars. But it can't be found in any of the major conservative Bible translations. All of them add the concept of guilt here to show that David wasn't talking about someone trying to shed his blood. It's certainly true that in many psalms David referred to various enemies who wanted to kill him. But in this psalm there's no mention of any enemies. And so it's more likely that verse 14 is talking about David being guilty of shedding someone else's blood. And it's not too hard to figure out whom he was referring to. The inspired title of this psalm tells us that David wrote it after he committed adultery with Bathsheba. And we know from 2 Samuel 11 that David tried to cover up this sin by arranging for her husband to be killed in battle. Uriah was one of his best soldiers, but David ordered his death so that he could marry Bathsheba and pretend like there was nothing illegitimate about her pregnancy.

So David was guilty of breaking the sixth commandment. In Exodus 20:13 God said, "Do not murder." Now David didn't personally kill Uriah, but he was the one ultimately responsible for this murder. And according to the law of Moses, the penalty for his sin was death. Exodus 21:14 says, "If a person schemes and willfully acts against his neighbor to murder him, you must take him from my altar to be put to death." But this penalty can be traced all the way back to the time of Noah. After he and his family left the

ark, God told him about the punishment for committing murder. Listen to what God said in Genesis 9:6: “Whoever sheds human blood, by humans his blood will be shed, for God made humans in his image.”

So David knew that he deserved the death penalty because of his sin. And all he could do was beg God for mercy and ask for deliverance. And he emphasized his request by explicitly addressing it to God. He didn’t need to do that, because he already showed in verses 1 and 10 that he was talking to God. But he referred to God again to stress the importance of this request. The Hebrew word for God in all three places is pronounced *elohim*. It’s used over two thousand times in the Old Testament, and so it’s a very common term. Many people think that it’s one of God’s names, but this term can refer to false gods as well as the true God. And even when it refers to the true God, it’s almost always in the plural. This feature adds intensity and stresses God’s majesty.

Now David could have used God’s actual name here. It’s pronounced “Yahweh,” and normally it’s translated with the word LORD in all caps. Certainly David used this word in many other psalms, but he didn’t use it anywhere 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 just use this word once. He immediately repeated it and added a description of God. He wrote the phrase “God of my salvation.” The Hebrew word for salvation comes from the same root as the word for salvation that David used back in verse 12 when he referred to the joy of God’s salvation. And so it’s no surprise these two words have very similar meanings. Both of them refer primarily to physical deliverance.

We can look at several places where the Hebrew word for salvation in verse 14 refers to physical deliverance. Listen to what Jonathan said about David to Saul in 1 Samuel 19:5: “He took his life in his hands when he struck down the Philistine, and the LORD brought about a great victory for all Israel.” Proverbs 21:31 says, “A horse is prepared for the day of battle, but victory comes from the LORD.” So in both of these verses our Hebrew term is translated with the word “victory,” and it’s clear in both places that physical salvation is in view. But as we’ve already talked about, the focus in Psalm 51 is on spiritual salvation. In verse 14 David was talking about salvation from the punishment of his sin. Now certainly God saved David physically on many occasions, but he also saved David spiritually as well. And that’s what ultimately matters. Even when God allows us to suffer, we know that as Christians we have the promise of eternal life. And our spiritual salvation means that one day we’ll never have to experience any more physical pain.

So in Psalm 51:14 David asked God to save him from the guilt of bloodshed. He knew that he deserved the death penalty because of his sin, but he begged God to show him mercy. And then at the end of the verse he talked about what he would do if God granted his request. He said, “And my tongue will sing of your righteousness.” Now there’s actually no Hebrew word that means “and” at the beginning of this statement. But most Bible translations add this word or the word “then” to show David’s train of thought. He was making a commitment to do something for God, just like he did in verse 13. And what David resolved to do here in verse 14 was to use his tongue to sing.

The Hebrew word for tongue is often focused on the evil words that wicked people speak. Let's look at some verses that talk about what various people did with their tongues. Psalm 10:7 says, "Cursing, deceit, and violence fill his mouth; trouble and malice are under his tongue." Psalm 52:2 says, "Like a sharpened razor, your tongue devises destruction, working treachery." Psalm 78:36 says, "They deceived him with their mouths; they lied to him with their tongues." So the tongue is fire, like James 3:6 says. It can do a lot of damage if we're not careful. But we can also use our tongues for good. Proverbs 12:18 says that "the tongue of the wise brings healing," and Proverbs 15:2 says that "the tongue of the wise makes knowledge attractive." Listen to what Proverbs 31:26 says about a wife of noble character: "Her mouth speaks wisdom, and loving instruction is on her tongue."

Now we already saw in Psalm 51:13 that David wanted to teach the rebellious God's ways. But in verse 14 his focus was on his using tongue to sing. The Hebrew word for sing normally just refers to a joyful shout. For example, in Psalm 5:2 David said to God, "Let all who take refuge in you rejoice; let them shout for joy forever." Psalm 92:4 says, "I will shout for joy because of the works of your hands." So this Hebrew word doesn't necessarily refer to singing. But it can certainly include singing. Listen to what the psalmist said to God in Psalm 71:23: "My lips will shout for joy when I sing praise to you because you have redeemed me." Now in Psalm 51:14 we don't have a clear reference to singing. But we know that David wrote many psalms, including this one, and the psalms were meant to be sung. So it seems likely that he was thinking about singing here. And what he wanted to sing about was God's righteousness.

The Hebrew word for righteousness basically means "conformity to a moral standard." So most likely David's point here was simply that God always does what is right. And of course that's true even when God grants salvation. God is not being unjust when he saves people from the penalty of their sin. Now this doesn't mean that anyone deserves salvation. David didn't deserve to be forgiven of his sins, and neither do we. We all deserve eternal punishment because of our rebellion against God. So how can God be doing what is right and just when he saves us? We can start to answer this question by going all the way back to the first occurrence of the Hebrew word for righteousness. Genesis 15:6 says that "Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness." In other words, Abraham wasn't actually righteous in the ultimate sense, but God considered him to be righteous because of his faith.

But this is only part of the solution. Let's go to the New Testament and find the rest of the answer. The apostle Paul addressed this issue thoroughly in Romans 3. Look at what he wrote in verses 21–26: "But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been revealed, attested by the Law and the Prophets. The righteousness of God is through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe, since there is no distinction. For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. They are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. God presented him as an atoning sacrifice in his blood, received through faith, to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his restraint God passed over the sins previously committed. God presented him to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so that he would be righteous and declare righteous the one who has faith in Jesus."

So Paul stressed that God can declare us to be righteous because of our faith. But here we learn more about the object of our faith. We believe in Jesus, who died on the cross for our sins. God presented him

as an atoning sacrifice to demonstrate his righteousness. So Jesus was punished in our place so that we don't have to be punished. That's how God can be righteous and not punish us for our sins. That's why God is righteous when he forgives us. And this is a wonderful truth that should be on our lips regularly. When we're gathered together with fellow believers for corporate worship, we should follow David's example in Psalm 51:14. We should use our tongues to sing about God's righteousness in saving us. We can even do that when we're not at church! Whether we're singing or not, we should be proclaiming the gospel to the unbelievers God has placed around us.

Now let's move on to verse Psalm 51:15. Look at what David wrote in this verse: "Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise." In this verse we have the same pattern that we just saw in verse 14. First David started with a request to God, and then he committed to do something if his request was granted. But before we look at this request, notice that David once again made a direct reference to God. But this time he didn't use the Hebrew word *elohim*. Instead he switched to the word *adonai*, which is also not a name. It's just a title that means "lord" or "master," and so it can be used to refer to anyone in a position of authority. For example, it's used in reference to Joseph many times in the book of Genesis once he was elevated to power in Egypt. But usually this word refers to the true God and emphasizes his supreme authority.

So as David gave his request in verse 15, he humbly submitted himself to God and recognized his authority. And he asked the Lord to open his lips. In verse 14 he referred to the tongue, and here in verse 15 he mentioned the lips. And in both cases he was talking about speech. It's very difficult to speak without using both your tongue and your lips. But why did David ask God to open his lips? Does this mean that God had taken away David's ability to speak when he sinned? We know from Luke 1 that this happened to Zechariah, but there's no indication anywhere in Scripture that it happened to David. And so I don't think this is the correct solution.

But maybe David was just talking about God's sovereign control over everything, including our mouths. And certainly it's true that we wouldn't be able to do anything without God's ongoing work to sustain the universe and everything in it. But I don't think that's what David was talking about here. Instead I think he was just asking for forgiveness in a subtle way. You see, David was under the conviction of the Holy Spirit, and his conscience was accusing him of sin. And so he knew that he needed to confess his sin to God and receive forgiveness before he could be useful in God's service again. Otherwise he would have been a hypocrite! He would have been saying one thing and doing another. And his good works would not have been pleasing to God.

So when David asked God to open his lips, he was basically saying that his sin disqualified him from teaching others about the Lord. But once he received God's forgiveness, he would no longer be suffering under the weight of his sin, and he would be free to serve the Lord again. More specifically, at the end of verse 15 he said that his mouth would declare God's praise. So in verse 14 David referred to the tongue, and in the beginning of verse 15 he mentioned the lips. Now at the end of verse 15 he talked about the mouth. All three terms are different ways of referring to our speech. And what David wanted to do with his mouth was to declare God's praise.

The Hebrew word for declare means “to put something high and make it conspicuous.” When we declare something, we’re putting our words out there for people to hear. We’re bringing something to people’s attention and informing them about it. We’re basically functioning like a reporter. We’re taking some information that we’ve learned, and we’re declaring it to others. And what David wanted to declare was God’s praise. The Hebrew word for praise comes from the same root as the word *hallelujah*, which means “praise Yahweh.” And this word for praise refers to an expression of deep satisfaction in someone. When we declare God’s praise, we’re communicating our admiration for who he is and what he has done.

Now we can declare God’s praise in a variety of settings, but one of the main ways that we can do it is through singing. And so it’s no surprise that praise is connected to singing in Scripture. Listen to Psalm 66:1–2: “Let the whole earth shout joyfully to God! Sing about the glory of his name; make his praise glorious.” Psalm 106:12 says, “Then they believed his promises and sang his praise.” But we don’t have to sing to declare God’s praise. We can praise God when we’re teaching a large group or a small group. We can praise God when we’re rejoicing with someone or weeping with someone. We can praise God when we’re challenging someone or comforting someone.

The bottom line is that we should be praising God throughout the day. In Psalm 71:8 the writer said to God, “My mouth is full of praise and honor to you all day long.” We should be looking for more and more opportunities to praise the Lord. In Psalm 71:14 the psalmist wrote, “I will hope continually and will praise you more and more.” We should be praising God so much that everyone who knows us is aware that we’re a Christian. And we should be teaching the next generation to praise the Lord as well. Psalm 79:13 says, “We will declare your praise to generation after generation.” Let’s make sure that our children and grandchildren know how great God is. Let’s close in prayer and ask God for boldness to declare his praise.