

PSALM 51:16–17

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Turn in your Bibles to Psalm 51. We're nearing the end of the second section in this psalm, which is found in verses 10–17. We've been focused on the theme of restoration in this section. 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.

Now back in verses 1 and 3 David confessed his own rebellion against God. But here in verse 13 he was talking about the rebellion of others. So once David was forgiven of his rebellion, 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 here is a figurative reference to God's actions. And I think David was zooming in on a particular action 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.

Then in verse 13 David presented the results of his commitment. He said that sinners would return to God. Now I'm sure that some of the people David taught were already saved, and so they just needed to return to God like David did. But I suspect David 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 sometimes just 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 this is probably the meaning that David intended 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. Both passages are talking about the doctrine of repentance, which is essential for salvation.

Then in verse 14 David made another request to God. He asked God to save him from the guilt of bloodshed. The Hebrew word for save here has the nuance of taking someone out of danger. And normally it refers to physical deliverance and being rescued from one's enemies. But sometimes it has the nuance of spiritual deliverance and being rescued from the punishment of sin. And this is what David was talking about here. He wasn't just guilty of committing adultery with Bathsheba; he also shed the blood of her husband. Now David didn't personally kill Uriah, but he was the one ultimately responsible for this murder. He arranged for Uriah to be killed in battle so that he could marry Bathsheba.

So David knew that he was guilty of bloodshed and that he deserved to die because of his sin. All he could really do was beg God for mercy and ask for deliverance. And at the end of verse 14 he talked about what he would do if God granted his request. He made a commitment to do something for God, just like he did back in verse 13. He said that his tongue would sing of God's righteousness. The Hebrew word for sing here normally just refers to a joyful shout. So it doesn't necessarily refer to singing, but it can certainly include singing. And in our passage I think that singing is implied because this psalm was meant to be sung, just like all the other psalms. And what David said that he would sing about here was God's righteousness.

The Hebrew word for righteousness basically means "conformity to a moral standard." So David's point here was simply that God always does what is right. And that's true even when God grants salvation. Now we certainly deserve eternal punishment because of our sin. But Jesus took our punishment when he died on the cross. He was punished in our place so that we don't have to be punished. 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 here in verse 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.

Then in verse 15 we see the same pattern that David used in verse 14. He started with a request to God, and then he committed to do something once his request was granted. David asked the Lord to open his lips, and his mouth would declare God's praise. Now David wasn't saying that God had taken away his ability to speak when he sinned. That's what happened to Zechariah in Luke 1, but there's no indication anywhere in Scripture that it happened to David. I think what David was doing here was asking God in a subtle way to forgive him. He knew that he needed to repent 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 mouth, 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. After all, we can't speak properly without using our tongue, our lips, and our mouth. 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 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. And one of the ways that we declare God's praise is through singing. But we can also praise God in everyday speech when we're interacting with people. The bottom line is that we should be praising God throughout the day. We should be praising God so much that everyone who knows us is aware that we're a Christian. We need to make sure that people around us know how great God is.

Now let's move on to verse 16 and cover some new material. Look at what David wrote in Psalm 51:16: "You do not want a sacrifice, or I would give it; you are not pleased with a burnt offering." Before we look at the words that I just read, we need to talk about a word that I didn't read. The Christian Standard Bible does not translate the first word in the Hebrew text of this verse. But this word is translated in more literal Bible versions like the English Standard Version and the New American Standard Bible. These translations start this verse with the word "for." This conjunction introduces an explanation for what was just stated. And in this case I think it's pointing back to verse 14 and David's request for spiritual deliverance. But why should God have granted this request? Why should God have shown mercy to David and forgiven him? This is the question that David was answering in verse 16.

Now some Israelites might have been tempted to think that David needed to offer some sacrifices to receive forgiveness. And so David addressed this idea directly and refuted it strongly. He said that God did not want a sacrifice. The Hebrew word for want means "to delight or take pleasure in something." We already saw this term back in verse 6, where it was translated with the word "desire." David said there that God desires integrity in the inner self. So we saw in verse 6 what God delights in, and now in verse 16 we're seeing what God does not delight in. He does not want or take pleasure in sacrifice. The Hebrew word for sacrifice is a general word that can refer to a variety of offerings. What would normally happen with an offering was that a person would bring an animal to the altar at the tabernacle. And there the animal would be killed and offered to God in worship.

Now in the opening chapters of Leviticus there are five different offerings mentioned: the burnt offering, the grain offering, the fellowship offering, the sin offering, and the restitution offering. And the Hebrew word for sacrifice can refer to any of these offerings. But it's often connected to the fellowship offering in the Old Testament, and that's especially true in the Book of Leviticus. The Christian Standard Bible has the phrase "fellowship sacrifice" a total of 18 times in Leviticus. But here in Psalm 51 there is no direct reference to the fellowship offering. And so it's more likely that David was just talking about offerings in general here in the beginning of verse 16. Later in this verse he focused more specifically on the burnt offering, but at the beginning of the verse I think he was referring to any offering.

So David started verse 16 by saying that God did not want a sacrifice. If God had wanted a sacrifice, David said that he would have given it. David certainly didn't lack the money to offer sacrifices to God! God had blessed him with great wealth, and so he easily could have brought hundreds of animals to be sacrificed at the altar. But David believed that God didn't want any sacrifices from him. And in the second half of the verse he basically repeated himself. He said that God was not pleased with a burnt offering. The Hebrew word for pleased refers to taking pleasure in something or showing favor to someone. But when this term is used in connection with an offering, it refers to the acceptance of the offering of

the lack of acceptance. Listen to what God told the Israelites in Amos 5:22: “Even if you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them.”

So in Psalm 51:16 David didn’t think that God would accept any sacrifices from him. And he used the burnt offering as an example at the end of the verse. The fact that David mentioned this particular offering is not very surprising. The burnt offering was the first one covered in the Book of Leviticus. This offering was special because it’s the only one that involved burning the whole animal. This fact stressed a person’s complete dedication to God. But this offering also had some other noteworthy features. Leviticus 1:4 says that the worshiper needed to “lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering so it can be accepted on his behalf to make atonement for him.” So the idea is that the person’s sins were transferred to the animal, and then the animal died in the person’s place.

Now at this point we should be asking an important question. Why did David think that God wouldn’t accept a burnt offering from him? This offering seems like it was a perfect fit for David! He had sinned against God, and so he definitely could have benefitted from having his sins be transferred to an animal. And yet David didn’t think that the burnt offering could help him. In fact, he didn’t believe that God wanted any sacrifice from him. And that mindset seems to contradict what the Old Testament teaches about the sacrificial system. After all, God was the one who invented this system and commanded the Israelites to offer sacrifices! In Exodus 10:25 when Pharaoh offered to let the Israelites go, Moses told him, “You must also let us have sacrifices and burnt offerings to prepare for the LORD our God.” In Psalm 27:6 David said, “I will offer sacrifices in his tent with shouts of joy.”

So it’s clear from a variety of passages that there was nothing inherently wrong with offering sacrifices. But we also have many other passages that speak negatively about sacrifices. Listen to what David wrote in Psalm 40:6: “You do not delight in sacrifice and offering; you open my ears to listen. You do not ask for a whole burnt offering or a sin offering.” In Hosea 6:6 God said, “For I desire faithful love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.” So there are some pretty strong statements against sacrifices in those two passages, just like we’ve already seen in Psalm 51:16. And it would be pretty easy to think from reading these passages that God didn’t want sacrifices at all.

But then there are other passages that are more nuanced when they speak negatively about sacrifices. Listen to Proverbs 21:3: “Doing what is righteous and just is more acceptable to the LORD than sacrifice.” So Solomon didn’t say that God didn’t want sacrifices at all. He just stated that God views something as more important than sacrifice. He basically said that it’s better to be righteous than to offer sacrifices. And we see something similar in 1 Samuel 15:22. Listen to what the prophet Samuel told King Saul in this verse: “Does the LORD take pleasure in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the LORD? Look: to obey is better than sacrifice, to pay attention is better than the fat of rams.” So Samuel didn’t say that offering sacrifices was a bad thing. It just wasn’t as good as living in obedience to God.

So what we should conclude is that God was perfectly fine with sacrifices in general, but he did not want sacrifices from wicked people. Listen to Proverbs 15:8: “The sacrifice of the wicked is detestable to the LORD, but the prayer of the upright is his delight.” Proverbs 21:27 has a similar statement: “The sacrifice

of a wicked person is detestable—how much more so when he brings it with ulterior motives!” That last verse is especially helpful, because it shows us that God wasn’t just concerned about people’s behavior. He was looking deeper at their motives. He cared about what was happening with people on the inside. So I think it’s safe to say that sacrifices by themselves did not please God. A proper sacrifice required the proper attitude.

So we’ve seen in Psalm 51:16 that God didn’t want a sacrifice and that he wasn’t pleased with a burnt offering. But in light of other Scripture passages, we should treat these statements as hyperbole. In other words, David was exaggerating to make a point. We already saw hyperbole in verse 4, and now I believe we’re seeing it again. David’s point here is that God didn’t want sacrifices as much as he wanted the right attitude. And that’s exactly where David went next in Psalm 51. Look at what he wrote in verse 17: “The sacrifice pleasing to God is a broken spirit. You will not despise a broken and humbled heart, God.” The Hebrew word for sacrifice here is the same one that we just saw in verse 16. Once again David was just referring to offerings in general.

Now in verse 16 David was talking about sacrifices that God was not pleased with. But here in verse 17 his focus was on “the sacrifice pleasing to God.” The Christian Standard Bible is actually not very literal here. The English Standard Version and the New American Standard Bible correspond more closely to the original Hebrew text. Both of these translations have the phrase “the sacrifices of God.” So the word “sacrifice” is in the plural here to stress that this sacrifice was to be offered over and over. But the phrase “of God” makes it sound like David was talking about God’s sacrifices. In other words, they were offered by God, which of course makes no sense. That’s why the Christian Standard Bible interprets this phrase for us. David was talking about sacrifices that were acceptable or pleasing to God. And he said that the sacrifice pleasing to God is a broken spirit.

The Hebrew word for broken just means “to shatter or smash.” It’s used in Exodus 32, which talks about what happened when Moses descended Mount Sinai with the stone tablets that God had written the Ten Commandments on. Verse 19 says, “As he approached the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses became enraged and threw the tablets out of his hands, smashing them at the base of the mountain.” This word is also used in Psalm 3:7, where David wrote, “Rise up, LORD! Save me, my God! You strike all my enemies on the cheek; you break the teeth of the wicked.” So this word can certainly be used literally, but it can also be used figuratively as well. In Psalm 34:18 David said, “The LORD is near the brokenhearted; he saves those crushed in spirit.” Obviously David wasn’t talking about people with literal broken hearts, because then they’d be dead! Instead he was talking about people who were going through difficult situations. They were broken in the sense that they were suffering on the inside because of their challenging circumstances.

And David was also using this Hebrew word for broken figuratively in Psalm 51 as well. Once again he was talking about suffering on the inside. David used the word “spirit” here, which comes from the same Hebrew word that we saw back in verses 10–12. In verse 11 it was referring to the Holy Spirit or the third member of the Trinity. But in verses 10 and 12 it was referring to David’s spirit or his immaterial being. And that’s what he was talking about here in verse 17 as well. Now inner pain can certainly have some

physical effects, like having a headache or not being able to sleep at night. But David's focus here was on his immaterial person, and he was talking about suffering on the inside because of his sin. As he said back in verse 3, his sin was always before him. In other words, it was always on his mind. That's where his conscience had been accusing him and the Holy Spirit had been convicting him.

Then at the end of verse 17 David said that God would not despise a broken and humbled heart. The Hebrew word for despise refers to treating someone with contempt. It has to do with viewing something as though it has very little value. It's basically the opposite of honoring someone. In 1 Samuel 2:30 God said, "Those who honor me I will honor, but those who despise me will be disgraced." So that verse is talking about people in general who despise God. But Scripture gives us many examples of specific individuals who despised people or even things. Genesis 25:34 says that "Esau despised his birthright." That's because he had sold it to Jacob for a meal! Now listen to what 1 Samuel 17:42 tells us about Goliath: "When the Philistine looked and saw David, he despised him because he was just a youth, healthy and handsome."

But Goliath wasn't the only person who despised David. Listen to 2 Samuel 6:16: "As the ark of the LORD was entering the city of David, Saul's daughter Michal looked down from the window and saw King David leaping and dancing before the LORD, and she despised him in her heart." So David was despised by others on different occasions, but he was also guilty of despising someone. In 2 Samuel 12 the prophet Nathan confronted David about his sins against Uriah and Bathsheba. Listen to what Nathan said to David in verses 9–10: "Why then have you despised the LORD's command by doing what I consider evil? You struck down Uriah the Hethite with the sword and took his wife as your own wife—you murdered him with the Ammonite's sword. Now therefore, the sword will never leave your house because you despised me and took the wife of Uriah the Hethite to be your own wife."

So David despised God when he sinned and did what was evil in God's sight. Anytime we sin against the Lord, we're dishonoring him and treating him with contempt. So there's no one who's been despised more often than God. And that includes the times when Jesus was despised on the earth. The prophet Isaiah even predicted that this would happen. Listen to what he said about the Messiah in Isaiah 53:3: "He was despised and rejected by men, a man of suffering who knew what sickness was. He was like someone people turned away from; he was despised, and we didn't value him." When Jesus came to earth, the vast majority of people despised and rejected him. And he was never more despised than when he was suffering on the cross. But he willingly humbled himself so that we could be forgiven. He was despised so that he wouldn't have to despise us.

But what is the attitude that we need to have so that God won't despise us? David answered this question for us at the end of Psalm 51:17. He said that God would not despise a broken and humbled heart. The Hebrew word for heart is the same one that we already saw back in verse 10. And in both places it doesn't refer to the literal organ of the body that pumps blood. Instead it points to our inner person. And so David was using the Hebrew words for spirit and heart synonymously here in verse 17. He actually did the same thing in verse 10 as well, but in that verse he used these words in reverse order. The result is a beautiful literary device called a chiasm in which an author repeats his material in reverse order. And David used this chiasm to create bookends for the second section in this psalm.

So in verse 17 David talked about the heart that God doesn't despise, and he described it in two ways. First, he said that it's a broken heart. The Hebrew word for broken is the same one that we just saw earlier in this verse. David was repeating it here for emphasis. But this time David added another term to help us understand what he meant by the word "broken." The second term that describes the heart God doesn't despise is the word "humbled." The Hebrew word for humbled literally means "crushed." It's used only four times in the Old Testament, and all of them are in the Book of Psalms. We already saw it used back in verse 8 of this psalm, where David made this request to God: "Let the bones you have crushed rejoice." So in that verse David pictured himself as someone who had been physically beaten. But the word "crushed" there is probably just a figurative reference to how God was constantly reminding David about his sin.

And so David's inner person was broken and crushed as a result of his sin. In a sense God beat him up on the inside because of his sin. God took David's hard and unrepentant heart, and he softened it and prepared David to acknowledge his sin and turn away from it. It's similar to what a farmer does in the spring when he plants his seeds. He doesn't just spread them on the hardened soil! First he uses a rototiller to break up the soil and soften it. Then when he spreads the seeds, they'll be able to go down into the soil. Only then can they grow and produce crops. So when God uses his rototiller on our hearts, he's basically humbling us. The Christian Standard Bible is on the right track here by giving us the word "humbled." When God breaks and crushes our inner person, he's making us aware of our sin and helping us to confess it to him.

It's appropriately ironic that God did not accept broken or crushed animals as sacrifices, but the only kind of person he will forgive is someone with a broken and crushed heart. God didn't want sacrifices from people with hard and unrepentant hearts. But he was happy to accept sacrifices from people with soft and humble hearts. They needed to recognize that because of their sin, they deserved to die instead of the sacrificial animal. So the simple fact of the matter is that without humility we cannot be saved from our sins. James 4:6 says that "God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble." And humility is an attribute that we need to continue developing in our lives after we're saved. In Philippians 2:3 Paul said, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility consider others as more important than yourselves." Only those with humble hearts are pleasing to God. Let's close in prayer and ask for God's help to grow in humility.