

# PSALM 51:18–19

January 2, 2022

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Turn in your Bibles to Psalm 51. We've now finished looking at the first two sections in this psalm. The first section is found in verses 1–9, and it's focused on the theme of confession. There David acknowledged that he had sinned against God, and he made 10 different requests in which he was basically asking God to forgive him of his sins. The second section in this psalm is found in verses 10–17, and it's focused on the theme of restoration. David made another eight requests to God, and his main focus was on asking God to help him grow spiritually. And he committed himself to teaching others about God and declaring his praise.

Last week we looked at the last two verses in this section, and we saw David's statement in verse 16 that God didn't want a sacrifice. That statement is pretty shocking, isn't it? After all, God was the one who invented Israel's sacrificial system, and he commanded the people to offer sacrifices to him! When they sinned against God like David did, they needed to offer a sacrifice. It's no surprise that David wrote these words in Psalm 27:6: "I will offer sacrifices in his tent with shouts of joy." So why did David say in Psalm 51:16 that God didn't want a sacrifice? The answer is that he was using hyperbole; in other words, he was exaggerating to make a point. His point wasn't that God didn't want sacrifices at all. It's that God wanted something else more than he wanted sacrifices.

We can support this conclusion from several passages of Scripture. Listen to what the prophet Samuel told King Saul in 1 Samuel 15:22: "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." Samuel didn't say here that offering sacrifices was a bad thing. It just wasn't as good as living in obedience to God. So I think it's safe to say that God was perfectly fine with sacrifices in general, but he did not want sacrifices from wicked people. In Proverbs 15:8 Solomon said, "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!" This verse shows us that God wasn't just concerned about people's behavior. He cared about what was happening on the inside. A proper sacrifice required the proper attitude.

And that's exactly where David went next in Psalm 51. In verse 17 he said that the sacrifice pleasing to God was a broken spirit. The Hebrew word for broken just means "to shatter or smash." This word is also used in Exodus 32:19, which tells us what happened when Moses descended Mount Sinai with the stone tablets that God had just written the Ten Commandments on. This verse 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.” So this word can certainly be used literally, but as we’ve seen with many other words, it can be used figuratively as well. In Psalm 34:18 David said, “The LORD is near the brokenhearted; he saves those crushed in spirit.” Now 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. But David’s focus here was on how he was 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.

So it’s a good thing for someone to have a broken spirit. And at the end of verse 17 David confirmed this point and 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. And David certainly knew what it was like to be despised. 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.” Later on David’s own wife despised him when she saw him dancing before the Lord while the ark of the covenant was being transported to Jerusalem.

So David was despised by others on different occasions, but he was also guilty of despising someone. Listen to what the prophet Nathan said to David in 2 Samuel 12:9–10: “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 time when Jesus lived on the earth. Listen to this prediction 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.”

So 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 basically

synonymous with the Hebrew word for spirit. Both of them refer to our inner person. And David used the same Hebrew word for broken to modify both terms.

But then David added another term to help us understand what he meant by the word “broken.” He also described the heart that God doesn’t despise with the word “humbled.” The Hebrew word for humbled literally means “crushed.” And so there’s a sense in which God was beating up David 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. So 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 is making us aware of our sin and keeps reminding us about it. He forces us into a corner and brings us to our knees so that we confess our sin to him.

So 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. And 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.” The bottom line is that only those with humble hearts are pleasing to God.

Now let’s move on to some new material and cover the third and final section in Psalm 51. It’s found in verses 18–19, and the focus is on the theme on intercession. In the first two sections David made 18 requests to God for himself, but he didn’t want to end this psalm without making some requests for the nation as well. Look at what David wrote in verse 18: “In your good pleasure, cause Zion to prosper; build the walls of Jerusalem.” Now the Christian Standard Bible isn’t very literal at the beginning of this verse. The English Standard Version gives us a more literal translation of the Hebrew text. It says, “Do good to Zion in your good pleasure.” The Hebrew verb here is also used in Exodus 1:20, which says that “God was good to the midwives.” These were the women who disobeyed Pharaoh and did not kill the Israelite baby boys. And verse 21 shows us how God was good to these women. It says that “since the midwives feared God, he gave them families.”

So this Hebrew verb often indicates physical prosperity of some kind, such as children or crops. And this is why the Christian Standard Bible translates this verb with the word “prosper” in many places. For example, in Deuteronomy 5:16 Moses said, “Honor your father and mother, as the LORD your God has commanded you, so that you may live long and so that you may prosper in the land the LORD your God is giving you.” And so in Psalm 51:18 we also have the word “prosper” in the Christian Standard Bible. David was asking God to do good to Zion or cause Zion to prosper. Zion is just another way of referring to the city of Jerusalem, and that’s very obvious in our passage. After all, we see a reference to Jerusalem in the parallel statement at the end of verse 18.

The first reference to Zion in the Old Testament is found in 2 Samuel 5, which starts by telling us that

David became king over all Israel. Then we see what he did shortly afterwards. Listen to verses 6-7: “The king and his men marched to Jerusalem against the Jebusites who inhabited the land. The Jebusites had said to David, ‘You will never get in here. Even the blind and the lame can repel you,’ thinking, ‘David can’t get in here.’ Yet David did capture the stronghold of Zion, that is, the city of David.” Notice that Zion is called a stronghold here, and that’s important because the Hebrew word for Zion probably comes from a root that means “protect” or “defend.” So the reason this word was used to refer to Jerusalem was most likely that it was a well-defended fortress. The Jebusites certainly thought that it was, because they didn’t think that David could conquer this city and take it from them. But their pride led to their downfall, and David captured Jerusalem and made it his capital city.

So in Psalm 51:18 David asked God to do good to Zion or cause Zion to prosper. But David qualified this statement by adding the phrase “in your good pleasure.” The Hebrew word for pleasure can have different nuances depending on the context. Sometimes it has the idea of a sacrifice being accepted by God. Leviticus 19:5 says, “When you offer a fellowship sacrifice to the LORD, sacrifice it so that you may be accepted.” On other occasions this Hebrew word has the more general idea of favor. That’s how most Bible versions translate the word in Psalm 5:12. There David said, “For you, LORD, bless the righteous one; you surround him with favor like a shield.”

But there’s another important nuance for this Hebrew word, and it’s represented by the word “will.” This is the meaning that we see in Psalm 40:8, where David said, “I delight to do your will, my God, and your instruction is deep within me.” This is the nuance that I believe David intended in Psalm 51:18. So David was basically asking God to do good to Zion or cause Zion to prosper only if that was his will and brought him pleasure. David was doing what the apostle John commanded us to do in 1 John 5. In verse 14 he said, “This is the confidence we have before him: If we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.” The point is that we need to submit our prayer requests to God’s will. That’s how Jesus taught us to pray in Matthew 6. In verse 10 he said, “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” And Jesus showed us how to do that when he was facing the cross. In Mark 14:36 he said to his Father, “Not what I will, but what you will.”

You see, God’s will is best for us, and so we must learn to pray according to his will. God certainly invites us to pray and present our requests to him. James 4:2 even says that “you do not have because you do not ask.” But then verse 3 says that “you ask and don’t receive because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures.” So our motivation for praying should always be to please God and not ourselves. But even when we have the right motives, God doesn’t always grant our requests because we’re not praying according to his will. We’re asking for something that doesn’t fit with what God desires. We’re going against what he has revealed in his Word.

And David understood that his request in the first half of Psalm 51:18 might be against God’s will. He knew that it didn’t always bring God pleasure to cause Zion to prosper. That’s because the Israelites often fell into sin. David himself had sinned recently, but he was confessing his sin and seeking forgiveness. However, David didn’t know what was going on in the hearts of his people. If many of them were living in rebellion against God, then there was no guarantee that God would bring prosperity on the nation. So

David wisely submitted his request to God's will. He asked God to cause Zion to prosper only if it pleased him to do so.

Then David added a second request at the end of verse 18. He asked God to “build the walls of Jerusalem.” This request is more specific than the first one and brings some clarification. The way that David wanted God to cause Jerusalem to prosper was by building its walls. Now this request is a bit confusing at first glance, because we already saw in 2 Samuel 5 that Jerusalem was a stronghold. In other words, the city already had walls and was well fortified. This fact has led many Bible scholars, even some conservative ones, to conclude that the last two verses of this psalm were added during the Babylonian exile or shortly afterwards. And there's nothing inherently wrong with this view, as long as we believe that they were added by a prophet or another qualified individual under divine inspiration. The Hebrew word for build in Psalm 51:18 doesn't necessarily refer to building something from scratch. Sometimes it's a reference to rebuilding something.

But I think the best view here is that David wrote the entire psalm, including the last two verses. Some Bible scholars point out that David's son Solomon actually did some construction on the walls of Jerusalem. We see in 1 Kings 3:1 that “Solomon made an alliance with Pharaoh king of Egypt by marrying Pharaoh's daughter. Solomon brought her to the city of David until he finished building his palace, the LORD's temple, and the wall surrounding Jerusalem.” Now this doesn't mean that Jerusalem didn't have a wall at all during the time of David. Most likely Solomon enlarged the city when he built his palace and the temple, and therefore he had to extend the walls of the city to enclose these new buildings. So it's possible that David was thinking ahead to this time of construction.

But this view runs into a serious problem when we get to verse 19, as we will see later. And so I think there's a better solution here. We've been assuming that the Hebrew word for walls in verse 18 should be understood literally, but it can also be interpreted figuratively. It's used in 1 Samuel 25:16 to speak about David and his men as a wall of protection around Nabal's household. And in a similar way, in Psalm 51:18 David was probably talking about the walls of Jerusalem figuratively. He wasn't referring to brick walls but to the moral defense of the city. And that started with the moral condition of the king who lived there. David had sinned against the Lord and needed forgiveness. Once he was restored to a right relationship with God, then he could lead the city and the nation with integrity and without hypocrisy. With God's help he could teach the people and show them by example how they should live so that would be eligible for God's protection.

Now let's move on to verse 19 and see how David finished this psalm. Look at what he wrote here: “Then you will delight in righteous sacrifice, whole burnt offerings; then bulls will be offered on your altar.” David started this verse with the word “then,” which indicates a temporal progression. He was talking about something that would happen after his requests in verse 18 were granted. He said that God would delight in righteous sacrifice. The Hebrew word for delight is the same one that we already saw in verses 6 and 16. It just means “to take pleasure in something.” In verse 16 he said that God did not want or take pleasure in a sacrifice, but here in verse 19 he said that God would delight or take pleasure in righteous sacrifice. It almost sounds like David contradicted himself, but in verse 19 he added the word “righteous.”

The Hebrew word for righteous basically means “conformity to a moral standard.” We already saw a different word from this root back in verse 14. There the focus is on the fact that God always does what is right. But here the focus is on the sacrifices that people would offer to God. And it sounds like David was just saying that the sacrifices needed to be offered correctly according to the rules. But the previous context shows us that David was focused more on the heart of the worshiper than the procedure for the sacrifices. A more literal translation here is actually found in the updated New International Version, which has the phrase “sacrifices of the righteous.” As we saw last week, God would only accept sacrifices from people who had a broken spirit and a humbled heart. They needed to be in a right relationship with him. If they were forsaking their sin, then God would delight in their sacrifices.

The Hebrew word for sacrifices is the same term that David used in verses 16–17. It’s a general term that can refer to any kind of offering. But David went on to give an example of a specific offering, just like he did in verse 16. In verse 19 the Christian Standard Bible has the phrase “whole burnt offering,” but the New American Standard Bible is more literal here. It has the phrase “burnt offering and whole burnt offering.” There are two Hebrew words here that are connected with a conjunction normally translated with the word “and.” The first word is the same one that we saw in verse 16, and the second one is a rare word that is basically synonymous with the first one. They both refer to the fact that this offering was special because it’s the only one that involved burning the whole animal. So this offering emphasized a person’s complete dedication to God.

But David didn’t just focus on how burnt offerings would be sacrificed once God strengthened the moral defense of Jerusalem and made the city prosperous. David made another statement at the end of verse 19 about what he hoped would happen in the future. He said, “Then bulls will be offered on your altar.” The Hebrew word for then is the same one that we just saw at the beginning of verse 19. It shows that the two statements in this verse are parallel. They both focus on what would happen after God granted David’s requests in verse 18. God would delight in whole burnt offerings from the righteous, and at least some of those offerings would involve bulls.

Now it wasn’t required in Israel’s sacrificial system to offer a bull. God gave the people choices when they offered a burnt offering. Leviticus 1 tells us that they could bring an animal from the herd, an animal from the flock, or a bird. Herd animals were the most valuable, and birds were the least valuable. God was flexible because he wanted all the Israelites to be able to participate, whether they were rich or poor. So when David said that bulls would be offered on the altar, he was giving evidence that the people in general would be prosperous if God granted his requests in verse 18. Many of them would be able to afford to sacrifice bulls to God. They would bring them to God’s altar and sacrifice them in complete devotion to him.

The Hebrew word for altar comes from the same root as the Hebrew word for sacrifice used earlier in the verse. This connection just shows that the altar was the place of sacrifice. David was talking about the bronze altar at the tabernacle. This altar was mostly made out of wood, but it was called “the bronze altar” because it was overlaid with bronze. But it’s more commonly called “the altar of burnt offering” in Scripture to stress that it was where burnt offerings were sacrificed. This altar was about seven and a half

feet square and about four and a half feet tall. And there were horns on each corner of the altar where the priests would put some of the blood from the sacrifices. This altar was located in the courtyard of the tabernacle right in front of the entrance to the tabernacle where God's visible presence dwelled. That's why it was appropriate for David to say that the altar was God's. He was emphasizing that the sacrifices were made in his presence and that they were a pleasing aroma to him.

So now we can see why it doesn't make sense that David was talking about the literal walls of Jerusalem in verse 18. Otherwise he would have been implying that the construction of the walls needed to be finished before God would delight in the sacrifices of the people. And that view just doesn't fit with the context here or the rest of Scripture. The simple fact of the matter is that pure worship didn't require city walls, and on the flip side of the coin, city walls didn't guarantee pure worship. There were plenty of unacceptable sacrifices in Jerusalem from wicked people after Solomon finished extending the walls of the city. And when the Israelites returned from exile and rebuilt the temple, there was pure worship before the walls of the city were rebuilt. Ezra 6:17 shows that there were hundreds of animals sacrificed to God as part of the temple's dedication.

So David main focus as he ended Psalm 51 was on the spiritual condition of his people. He interceded for them by making two requests to God on their behalf. He wanted them to prosper physically, but he knew that there was no guarantee of God's blessing and protection unless they lived in obedience to him. So David wanted the Israelites to follow his example and turn away from any sins that they were clinging to. He wanted them to have pure hearts so that their sacrifices would be acceptable to God. Now of course we don't need to offer animal sacrifices today. Hebrews 10:4 tells us that "it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins." These sacrifices were simply pointing forward to Jesus. Paul said in Colossians 2:17 that "these are a shadow of what was to come; the substance is Christ." As John the Baptist said in John 1:29, Jesus is "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." Hebrews 10:10 says that "we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all time."

But even though we don't need to offer animal sacrifices anymore, God does want us to offer ourselves to him. In Romans 12:1 Paul said, "Therefore, brothers and sisters, in view of the mercies of God, I urge you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God; this is your true worship." Because God showed mercy to us when he saved us from our sins, we should respond by completely dedicating ourselves to serve him. And this dedication isn't a one-time decision but a continual lifestyle. Whenever we fall into sin, we need to confess it to God and rededicate ourselves to living for his glory. That's the message of Psalm 51, and it still applies to us today. Let's close in prayer and thank God for saving us and allowing us to serve him.