

PSALM 51:5–6

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Turn in your Bibles to Psalm 51. We're slowly making our way through this important psalm of David, and so far we've covered the first four verses. Let's do a little review before we look at some new material. In verses 1–2 David made four requests to God, and the first one was just a general request. David asked God to be gracious to him, even though he had just committed adultery with Bathsheba. Then David made three requests that were more specific than the first one. He was explaining how he wanted God to show grace to him. First, he asked God to blot out his rebellion. Second, he asked God to completely wash away his guilt. Third, he asked God to cleanse him from his sin. And David was basically saying the same thing in these three requests. He was using parallel statements to ask God to forgive him in three different ways.

Then in verses 3 and following, David showed how he could expect to be forgiven. He needed to confess his sin to the Lord. In verse 3 he said, "For I am conscious of my rebellion, and my sin is always before me." David was stressing here that he had a personal and intimate awareness of his sin with Bathsheba. It was always on his mind; he was thinking about it constantly. That's because David had a conscience, just like everyone who has ever lived. Our conscience is a gift from God that helps us to understand right from wrong. And God builds on the work of the conscience through the Holy Spirit, who convicts the world about sin, righteousness, and judgment. The Spirit helps people see their sin and convinces them of their wrongdoing when they disobey God. And if that's true for unbelievers, then it's even more true for believers, because the Holy Spirit lives in us continually.

Then in the beginning of verse 4, David reached the pinnacle of his confession. He said, "Against you—you alone—I have sinned and done this evil in your sight." In this statement David didn't focus on the fact that he had sinned. He was emphasizing whom he sinned against. He was stressing that his sin with Bathsheba was really a sin against God. But then he added the word "alone," which seems to indicate that his sin was only against God. In other words, he was apparently saying that he didn't sin against Bathsheba or her husband. But it seems obvious to us that adultery and many other sins are against other people. And we can prove that fact from Scripture.

Let's start by considering what Jesus said in Luke 17:3–4: "Be on your guard. If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and comes back to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him." So in verse 3 Jesus talked about the possibility of a Christian committing sin. But then in verse 4 he explained that he was talking about sin against a fellow believer. And one of the ways that this can happen is when we are a stumbling block to Christians

who have a weak conscience. In 1 Corinthians 8:12 Paul said that “when you sin like this against brothers and sisters and wound their weak conscience, you are sinning against Christ.”

So both Jesus and Paul clearly acknowledged the fact that we can sin against our fellow Christians. But Paul also said that when we sin against other believers, we’re also sinning against Christ. In other words, this isn’t an either-or situation; it’s a both-and situation. So why did David say in Psalm 51:4 that his sin with Bathsheba was against God alone? Many liberal Bible scholars say that Scripture has an error here, but there’s a much better solution. We should conclude that David was using hyperbole. In other words, he was exaggerating to make a point.

Now some Christians are uncomfortable with the idea that Scripture contains hyperbole. But if we reject the presence of hyperbole in the Bible, then we need to gouge out our right eye and cut off our right hand. After all, that’s what Jesus said that we should do in Matthew 5:29–30. But we shouldn’t understand those commands literally, because removing various body parts won’t actually solve our sin problem. The root goes much deeper within us. In Matthew 15:19 Jesus said that our sin flows from our heart. But Jesus was using hyperbole in Matthew 5 for a reason. His point was that we need to treat sin very seriously and take extreme measures to overcome it.

And there’s a reason that David used hyperbole in Psalm 51 as well. His point in verse 4 was that sin is first and foremost against God. Now certainly many sins are also against other people, and so we should seek their forgiveness. But all sin is ultimately against God, because it’s a violation of his character and his will for our lives. He created us in his image and gets to decide how we should behave. That’s why David said that his adultery with Bathsheba was evil in God’s sight. The reason sin is wrong is that God views it that way. Instead we should be doing what’s right in God’s sight. And normally that’s exactly what David did. Listen to 1 Kings 15:5: “For David did what was right in the LORD’s sight, and he did not turn aside from anything he had commanded him all the days of his life, except in the matter of Uriah the Hethite.” So this was the major stain on David’s life. But when he was confronted about his sin, he confessed it to the Lord. He acknowledged that he did what was evil in God’s sight.

And that leads us to the second half of Psalm 51:4, where David said, “So you are right when you pass sentence; you are blameless when you judge.” So David confessed his sin, and then he stated that God has the right to judge sin. Sin is against God’s will for our lives, but it doesn’t thwart his plan. He uses it to show his character and reveal attributes like holiness and justice. And God’s justice is always fair; no one can legitimately find fault with his decisions. So David completely accepted God’s judgment. He didn’t make excuses for his sin or try to shift the blame to others. He submitted to the temporal consequences of his sin. In 2 Samuel 12:11 Nathan said that God would bring disaster on David’s family because of his adultery with Bathsheba. But he wouldn’t have to experience eternal punishment in hell, because he confessed his sin to God and received forgiveness.

Now let’s move on to Psalm 51:5 and cover some new material. Look at what David wrote here: “Indeed, I was guilty when I was born; I was sinful when my mother conceived me.” In this verse David switched his focus from the recent past to the more distant past. In verse 4 he talked about his sin with Bathsheba, and

in verse 5 he talked about his sinful state at birth. In other words, his sin with Bathsheba flowed from who he was at the beginning of his life. And David emphasized his origin in verse 5 by starting with the word “indeed.” The English Standard Version and the New American Standard Bible have the word “behold,” which is a bit archaic. But it’s on the right track, because the Hebrew word here just means “to look” or “to see.” This term demands our attention and carries a lot of emphasis. It normally points us forward to what comes next in the text.

And David proceeded to say that he was guilty when he was born. But once again the English Standard Version and the New American Standard Bible give us a more literal translation. Both of them have this statement: “I was brought forth in iniquity.” The Hebrew verb here is passive, which means that David received the action of the verb instead of doing the action. He didn’t bring himself forth; someone else brought him forth. The verb here comes from a root that means “to writhe in labor pains.” It’s used in Isaiah 26:17, which says, “As a pregnant woman about to give birth writhes and cries out in her pains, so we were before you, LORD.” And so in Psalm 51:5 David was clearly talking about the time when his mother gave birth to him.

But David’s point here wasn’t to emphasize the event of his birth. He was focused on his condition at the time of his birth. The New American Standard Bible says that he “was brought forth in iniquity.” The Hebrew word for iniquity is the same one that we saw back in verse 2. It’s translated there with the word “guilt” in the Christian Standard Bible. But this Hebrew word comes from a root that means “to bend” or “to twist.” If you take something that’s straight and bend it, then it becomes crooked. The image here is a straight path of righteousness, and when we sin, we leave that path. We veer to the side and go astray. We depart from the standard of behavior that’s set by God. So a more literal translation here would be the word “crookedness.”

Now some Bible scholars think that this word doesn’t apply to David but to his mother. In other words, they believe that she behaved in a crooked way when she gave birth to him. And certainly we know from Leviticus 12 that a woman was considered unclean after she gave birth. But that’s because she was ceremonially unclean, not because she was morally unclean. There’s nothing wrong with a woman giving birth to a baby. After all, God commanded Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply. And that was before they even fell into sin. God created women so that they can become pregnant and give birth. It’s part of his good and wise plan for the human race.

So David wasn’t talking about his mother’s crookedness but his own crookedness in Psalm 51:5. That view fits the context very well, because of course David was confessing his sin in this psalm. And when he used the Hebrew word for crookedness back in verse 2, he was talking about his own crookedness. So it’s only natural that he would still be talking about his own crookedness here in verse 5. But this time he wasn’t talking specifically about a crooked action or even crooked behavior in general. He wasn’t saying that he did a crooked deed at the time of his birth. Instead he was stating that he was born in the condition of being crooked. It was inevitable that he would eventually start engaging in crooked behavior. And he emphasized his condition by his placement of the Hebrew phrase that literally means “in crookedness.” It comes early in the sentence right after the word translated “indeed.”

Then David gave a second statement in verse 5. He said, “I was sinful when my mother conceived me.” The Christian Standard Bible is more literal here than earlier in the verse, but the New American Standard Bible is even better. It says, “And in sin my mother conceived me.” The word “and” just connects this statement to the previous one and builds on it. Earlier David went back to the time of his birth, and here he went back even further to the time of his conception. The Hebrew word for conceived is very rare in the Old Testament. Outside this verse it’s used only a few times in the book of Genesis. And in each case it refers to animals in Jacob’s flock that were breeding. This term literally means “to be in heat,” and so it describes a female animal that’s ready to mate and become pregnant. But in Psalm 51:5 it’s obviously used figuratively since it refers to a woman. But the basic meaning of becoming pregnant is still present.

However, David’s point here wasn’t to emphasize the event of his conception. He was focused on his condition at the time of his conception. The New American Standard Bible says, “In sin my mother conceived me.” The Hebrew word for sin is the same one that we saw back in verses 2–3. It comes from a root that means “to miss a mark or a goal.” So the point is that we miss the mark of God’s perfect standard. He’s given us a target to shoot for, and we fail to hit the target. We don’t live according to his expectations for us. We don’t follow his instructions or obey his commands. Romans 3:23 says that we “fall short of the glory of God.” That’s what it means to sin.

But once again some Bible scholars think that this word doesn’t apply to David but to his mother. In other words, they believe that she committed sin when she conceived him. And the most common view here is that she had sex with his father outside of marriage. But there’s no proof for this idea anywhere else in Scripture. We can’t rule out this possibility completely, but it’s just speculation. The Bible doesn’t really tell us anything about David’s mother. So I believe it’s much more likely that David was talking about his sin in Psalm 51:5. After all, he already used the Hebrew word here to refer to his sin in verses 2–3. So we would expect him to continue talking about his sin in verse 5. His focus was on confessing his sin in this psalm, and so it doesn’t make sense for him to talk about his mother’s sin here. That just wouldn’t fit the context.

Now in verses 2–3 David was talking about his sin with Bathsheba. But I don’t see how he could have been referring to the sin of adultery in verse 5. In fact, there’s really no way that he was even talking about sinful behavior in general. We’re so undeveloped at the time of conception that it’s impossible for us to commit a sinful deed. So David must have been talking about being conceived in the condition of being sinful, just like he was focused on being born in the condition of being crooked earlier in the verse. In other words, it was inevitable that he would eventually start engaging in sinful behavior. And once again he emphasized his condition with his choice in word order. The New American Standard Bible preserves the literal word order this time and puts the phrase “in sin” near the beginning of this statement.

So what we see here in verse 5 is the doctrine of original sin, though some theologians prefer to call it “inherited sin.” But either way it refers to the moral corruption that we possess as a consequence of Adam’s sin in the Garden of Eden. And it means that we have a tendency to engage in habitually sinful behavior. We call this tendency a “sin nature.” This is what Paul was talking about in Romans 5:19 when he said that “through one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners.” In other words, we have a sin

nature as a result of Adam's disobedience. And this is true for everyone who has ever lived. Ecclesiastes 7:20 says, "There is certainly no one righteous on the earth who does good and never sins."

So we're all sinners because we have a sin nature, and what David said in Psalm 51:5 is that he received this sin nature at the time of his conception. It was part of his character from the very beginning of his existence. There was never a moment in his life when he did not have the condition of being sinful. Ultimately he wasn't a sinner because he sinned. He sinned because he was a sinner. And I think it's safe to conclude that what David said about himself is true for everyone. We've all had a sin nature since we were conceived. And by the way, this fact strongly implies that our lives began at conception. This is why we believe that abortion is actually murder. But David's main point here isn't simply that we began to exist at conception. It's that we also began to be sinners at that time.

Now many people object to the doctrine of original sin and claim that it's not fair. How could God allow us to have a sin nature before we even committed our first sin? But that's simply a consequence of being a descendant of Adam. We all understand the concept of genetics and the fact that we inherit abilities and inclinations from our parents. The tendency to sin is no different. You could say that we all have the genetic defect of sin. But we should remember that we have a great physician who can heal us of this genetic defect. Romans 5:19 doesn't just say that we became sinners through one man's disobedience. It also says that "through the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous." Of course that one man is Jesus, and he obeyed his Father by coming to earth and dying on the cross for our sins. When we turn from our sin and trust in him to save us, God gives us a new nature so that we have the power to overcome our sinful tendencies and live in obedience to him.

Now let's move on to verse 6 in Psalm 51. Look at what David wrote here: "Surely you desire integrity in the inner self, and you teach me wisdom deep within." The Hebrew word for surely is the same one that we saw at the beginning of the previous verse. It shows that verses 5–6 should be understood together. There's a contrast here between David's sinful condition and God's desire for him. The Hebrew word for desire means "to delight or take pleasure in something." David used it in Psalm 5:4, where he said to the Lord, "For you are not a God who delights in wickedness; evil cannot dwell with you." So this verse tells us what God does not delight in, and Psalm 51:6 tells us what God does delight in. He does not delight in wickedness, but he does delight in integrity.

The Hebrew word for integrity is a rich term that can have a variety of nuances. The English Standard Version and the New American Standard Bible have the word "truth" here. The New International Version has the word "faithfulness" here. The Christian Standard Bible basically tries to combine these ideas with the word "integrity," which has to do with being honest and consistent. The foundational idea with this Hebrew word is the concept of certainty. Contrary to what our culture says today, truth is not relative; it's certain. And if you're faithful, then people can be certain that they can depend on you. God takes pleasure in people who are truthful and faithful; they're full of integrity.

Then David gave the location where God wants to see integrity: "In the inner self." The Hebrew word here describes something that is covered or hidden. The only other place where it's used in the Old Tes-

tament is Job 38:36, where God asked Job, “Who put wisdom in the heart or gave the mind understanding?” Our Hebrew word is translated with the word “heart” there. So this word refers to the place where wisdom can be found in a person. It’s a reference to our immaterial being, which is joined to our body. The primary idea seems to be our invisible mind, which works through our brain. And so it’s logical to think of the immaterial part of a person as being inside us and covered by our flesh.

Now there are a few Bible translations that interpret this term differently in Psalm 51:6. The updated New International Version says, “Yet you desired faithfulness even in the womb.” The New Living Translation says, “But you desire honesty from the womb.” Both of these versions translate our Hebrew term with the word “womb.” And this interpretation makes some sense in light of verse 5, which is talking about conception and birth. But this interpretation doesn’t work at all in Job 38:36. God was clearly talking there about the place where wisdom can be found in a person. And that place is definitely not the womb! So I believe the Christian Standard Bible is correct to give us the phrase “inner self” in Psalm 51:6. And most Bible translations take this interpretation. The English Standard Version has the phrase “inward being,” and the New American Standard Bible has the similar phrase “innermost being.” This is the place where God wants to see integrity. It starts inside us and works itself out through words and actions.

But of course David didn’t act with integrity with he committed adultery with Bathsheba. He wasn’t faithful to obey God’s law, and he lied about his sin and tried to cover it up. And so God wasn’t happy with David at that point, because he doesn’t delight in wickedness. But God didn’t just leave David on his own to try to figure out how to grow spiritually and become a man of integrity. Look at the second statement in Psalm 51:6: “And you teach me wisdom deep within.” The word “and” connects this statement with the first statement in the verse. This second statement flows from the first one and shows how David could grow in the area of integrity. God would teach him wisdom.

The Hebrew word for teach normally just means “to know.” But when it’s used in what scholars call the hiphil stem, as it is here, it has the nuance of causing someone to know. That’s why the New American Standard Bible says, “You will make me know wisdom.” But most translations just use the word “teach,” because that’s how we cause someone to know something. And God was willing to teach wisdom to David. The Hebrew word for wisdom doesn’t refer primarily to intellectual understanding but to moral skill. It’s the ability to apply God’s word to our lives. Proverbs 2:4 tells us that we need to search for wisdom like hidden treasure. But James 1:5 says that we should ask God for wisdom. So there’s a balance here between divine sovereignty and human responsibility.

And in Psalm 51:6 David was focused on divine sovereignty. He was stressing the fact that God would teach him wisdom so that he could be a man of integrity. But this wasn’t just something that would happen in the future for David. He used the Hebrew imperfect tense here, which focuses on the development of the action. It’s like watching a parade unfold from the sidewalk. The focus is on the fact that the action is ongoing. David was saying that God was already teaching him wisdom continuously. It’s something that had already started, and it would continue into the future. So the problem wasn’t that God hadn’t already David wisdom about how to live according to his will. The problem was that David wasn’t using the wisdom that God had taught him. But David knew that God wouldn’t give up on him. We often need

to learn something multiple times before it sinks in. And God is patient with us and keeps teaching us wisdom.

But at the end of verse 6 David talked about the place where God puts his wisdom. David said that God taught him wisdom “deep within.” The Hebrew word here is used in 1 Kings 3:19 to refer to stopping up a spring of water. And it’s used in Daniel 12:9 to refer to words that are secret. So this word describes something that is hidden or secret. In Psalm 51:6 it’s parallel to the Hebrew word for inner self. Once again David was talking about his immaterial being, which is hidden inside him. And David emphasized this location by moving it forward in the second statement. The New American Standard Bible preserves the literal word order in the Hebrew. It says, “And in the hidden part You will make me know wisdom.” And the result here is a beautiful chiasm with David repeating himself in reverse order. Both of the phrases that describe our inner person are located in the middle of the verse. That’s where the emphasis is in a chiasm.

So what we see here is that God cares about what we’re like on the inside. He desires inward purity in his people. It wouldn’t have been good enough for David simply to shape up on the outside. He needed inner transformation, and God was helping him that area. And that’s true for all believers! God is slowly changing us from the inside out and making us more and more like Jesus. God is continually teaching us not to give in to our sinful nature and to live wisely. And he uses his word and his Spirit to do that. Let’s close in prayer and thank God for helping us to grow spiritually.