

# PSALM 51:7

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Turn in your Bibles to Psalm 51. We've now covered the first six verses of this psalm. 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. David had just committed adultery with Bathsheba, and so he deserved to die. But he asked God to treat him better than he deserved. 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 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 seemed to be saying that his sin with Bathsheba was only against God. But it's more likely that David was using hyperbole here. In other words, he was exaggerating to make a point. And his point was that sin is first and foremost against God. It's certainly true that many sins like adultery 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 sin with Bathsheba was evil in God's sight. The reason adultery is wrong is that God views it that way.

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.” Because sin is evil in God's sight, he has the right to judge it. 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.

Then in Psalm 51:5 David switched his focus from the recent past to the more distant past. He said, "Indeed, I was guilty when I was born; I was sinful when my mother conceived me." So in verse 4 David 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. He started verse 5 by talking about the time of his birth, and then at the end of the verse he went back even further to the time of his conception. But David wasn't emphasizing the events of his birth and conception. He was focused on his condition at the time of his birth and conception. He stated that he was in the condition of being sinful. He wasn't saying that he committed any sins before he was born. We're so undeveloped at the time of conception that it's impossible for us to commit a sinful deed. But David's point was that he would eventually start engaging in sinful behavior; it was inevitable.

So what we see here in verse 5 is the doctrine of original sin or what some theologians call "inherited sin." 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. It's been part of our character from the very beginning of our existence. And the implication here is that we're not sinners because we sin; we sin because we're sinners.

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." This one man is of course 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.

Then in Psalm 51:6 David transitioned from his sinful condition to God's desire for him. He wrote, "Surely you desire integrity in the inner self, and you teach me wisdom deep within." The Hebrew word for integrity can refer to either truth or faithfulness. The Christian Standard Bible basically tries to combine these ideas with the word "integrity," which has to do with being honest and consistent. But 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. So God delights in people who are truthful and faithful; they're full of integrity.

But David's focus here was on the location where God wants to see integrity: "In the inner self." The He-

brew word here describes something that is covered or hidden. It's a reference to our immaterial being, which is joined to our body and covered by it. This is the place where God wants to see integrity. But David lacked integrity in his inner self when 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. 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. He was patient with David and taught him wisdom deep within. 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.

But the focus here is on the place where God puts his wisdom: "Deep within." Once again David was talking about his immaterial being. And 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. But thankfully God was helping him that area. And he helps us today as well! God is slowly changing all believers from the inside out and making them more and more like Jesus. He's constantly teaching us not to give in to our sinful nature but to live wisely instead. And we know that he's not going to stop doing his good work in us until the job's finished.

Now let's cover some new material and move on to Psalm 51:7. Look at what David wrote here: "Purify me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow." In this verse David returned to the focus that he had in verses 1–2 where he basically asked God to forgive him. After he confessed his sin in verses 3–5, it was appropriate for him to repeat his request to be forgiven. But in the original Hebrew the requests are a bit different in verse 7. In verses 1–2 David used four imperative verbs to convey his requests. But here in verse 7 David just used regular verbs that are normally found in declarative statements. However, the Hebrew verbal system has a lot of flexibility, and sometimes these regular verbs are used to make a request. That's how all the major translations interpret the verbs in verse 7, and this approach makes the most sense in the context. But perhaps David was taking a softer approach than before and being a little less bold.

So David's first request in verse 7 was for God to purify him. The Hebrew verb here is actually the same one that we already saw in verse 4. There David said, "Against you—you alone—I have sinned and done this evil in your sight." There our verb is translated with the word "sinned." But of course that meaning makes absolutely no sense here in verse 7. It sounds ridiculous to say "sin me" instead of "purify me." Now it's theoretically possible that David meant "sin against me." But why in the world would David want God to sin against him? And that's impossible for God to do anyway! So another possibility is that David meant "cause me to sin." But once again that just doesn't make any sense here. David's asking God to forgive his sin, not cause him to sin.

So how do we solve this dilemma? The solution is that there must be a different nuance for the verb here. And we can confirm that this solution is correct by observing the stem. A Hebrew verb can appear in a variety of stems that are based on the same root. There's the regular stem, which is called the qal stem. But then there are other stems that have different nuances of meaning. Last week I talked about the Hebrew verb that means "to know" in the regular stem. But in the hiphil stem it has the nuance of causing someone to know. This is the stem that David used in verse 6, and the New American Standard Bible

gives us a pretty literal translation with the phrase “make me know.” But the Christian Standard Bible and most other translations have the word “teach” because that’s how we cause people to know something.

Now let’s talk about what’s going on with the Hebrew verb for sin. In verse 4 David used the regular stem for the verb, but in verse 7 he switched to a different stem. It’s called the piel stem, and it’s a very flexible stem that can be used in a variety of ways. One of them is a focus on the absence or removal of something. And so in the piel stem the Hebrew verb for sin can refer to making an offering for sin. It’s used this way in Leviticus 9:15, which says that “Aaron presented the people’s offering. He took the male goat for the people’s sin offering, slaughtered it, and made a sin offering with it as he did before.” So the idea here is that the sin offering removed the sin from the people. Of course we know from the New Testament that these Old Testament sacrifices couldn’t take away sin. But they pointed forward to Jesus, who offered himself as a sacrifice on the cross.

So when the Hebrew verb for sin is in the piel stem, it can refer to making an offering for sin. But it can also refer more generally to purifying someone from sin. That’s how it’s used in Numbers 19. In this chapter God told the Israelites what to do if they became unclean from touching a dead body. Listen to what he said in verses 17–19: “For the purification of the unclean person, they are to take some of the ashes of the burnt sin offering, put them in a jar, and add fresh water to them. A person who is clean is to take hyssop, dip it in the water, and sprinkle the tent, all the furnishings, and the people who were there. He is also to sprinkle the one who touched a bone, a grave, a corpse, or a person who had been killed. The one who is clean is to sprinkle the unclean person on the third day and the seventh day. After he purifies the unclean person on the seventh day, the one being purified must wash his clothes and bathe in water, and he will be clean by evening.”

So if you were an Israelite and you touched a dead body, you would need to be sprinkled with some special water. It would happen twice: on the third day and the seventh day. And the word “purifies” is used to refer to the sprinkling on the seventh day, because after that day you would become clean. That word “purifies” comes from the Hebrew verb that normally means “to sin.” But it’s used in the piel stem in that passage, and so it has a different nuance. It doesn’t refer specifically to making a sin offering like we saw in Leviticus 9. But it does refer more generally to purifying someone from sin. The focus is on the absence or removal of sin.

And this is exactly how David was using this verb in Psalm 51:7. In verse 4 he used the regular stem to talk about how he sinned against God. But then in verse 7 he switched to the piel stem to ask God to purify him from sin. He was basically asking God to undo his sin. When I’m working on the computer, one of my favorite features is the undo option. I’ll be typing away, and then I change my mind and decide that I don’t like anything that I typed for the past 30 seconds. So I use the handy keyboard shortcut for the undo option. I hold down the control button and press the letter Z. Sometimes I have to do it a few times! But eventually things go back to the way they were. That’s very similar to what David wanted God to do for him. He was asking God to undo his sin and purify him.

Then David talked about how he wanted God to purify him. He added the phrase “with hyssop.” The He-

brew word for hyssop appears only 10 times in the Old Testament. We just saw one of them in Numbers 19:18. Hyssop was dipped into the special water and then used to sprinkle the water on the unclean person. This word is also used five times in Leviticus 14 with reference to cleansing skin diseases and mildew contaminations. In verses 6–7 we see what the priest was supposed to do for someone with a skin disease: “He is to take the live bird together with the cedar wood, scarlet yarn, and hyssop, and dip them all into the blood of the bird that was slaughtered over the fresh water. He will then sprinkle the blood seven times on the one who is to be cleansed from the skin disease. He is to pronounce him clean and release the live bird over the open countryside.”

So this situation was a little different compared to what we read about in Numbers 19. That one involved sprinkling water, but here in Leviticus 14 it was blood that was sprinkled. And the sprinkling was to be done seven times instead of just twice. But in both cases hyssop was involved. According to 1 Kings 4, hyssop is a tree that grows on walls. In verses 30–31 we’re told that “Solomon’s wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the people of the East, greater than all the wisdom of Egypt. He was wiser than anyone.” Then in verses 32–33 we see that he “spoke 3,000 proverbs, and his songs numbered 1,005. He spoke about trees, from the cedar in Lebanon to the hyssop growing out of the wall.” Most Bible scholars agree that this hyssop is the same as the plant known today as Syrian marjoram. It’s a small, bushy plant that can grow to be about four feet tall. It’s valuable because it produces a form of oregano, which is still a very common herb today.

But we don’t really see the herbal benefits of hyssop mentioned in Scripture. Instead the focus is on how it was used to purify people who were ceremonially unclean. But it was also used in connection with the very first Passover meal right before the Israelites were freed from slavery in Egypt. Listen to Exodus 12:21–23: “Then Moses summoned all the elders of Israel and said to them, ‘Go, select an animal from the flock according to your families, and slaughter the Passover animal. Take a cluster of hyssop, dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and brush the lintel and the two doorposts with some of the blood in the basin. None of you may go out the door of his house until morning. When the LORD passes through to strike Egypt and sees the blood on the lintel and the two doorposts, he will pass over the door and not let the destroyer enter your houses to strike you.’”

So hyssop branches were used to put blood on the doorframes of the Israelite homes. The branches were sturdy enough to handle being used like a paint brush. And of course we know that the blood points forward to the death of Jesus on the cross when he shed his blood to pay the penalty for our sins. But did you know that blood isn’t the only connection between the Passover and the crucifixion? You might remember that when Jesus was on the cross, he said that he was thirsty. So according to John 19:29, some people “fixed a sponge full of sour wine on a hyssop branch and held it up to his mouth.” In God’s providence a hyssop branch was used so we could be reminded that God used hyssop to rescue his people from slavery in Egypt. Now we see hyssop at the cross, where God rescued us from slavery to sin through the death of his Son.

So in Psalm 51:7 David asked God to purify him with hyssop. But David wasn’t saying that he had a skin disease or that he had just touched a dead body. He wasn’t unclean ceremonially but morally. He was

speaking metaphorically and using ceremonial language to refer to a spiritual issue. He needed God to purify him of his sin. And he knew that if God granted his request, he would be clean. The Hebrew word for clean is the same term that David used back in verse 2. There he asked God to cleanse him from his sin. But this word is also used in Leviticus 14:7, which we just read. We saw that the priest was to sprinkle “blood seven times on the one who is to be cleansed from the skin disease.” So once again David was using a ceremonial term to refer to moral purity.

Then David made a second request in Psalm 51:7. First he asked God, “Purify me with hyssop, and I will be clean.” Then he said, “Wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.” This request is very similar to the first one. It starts with a request and ends with the result that would come if the request was granted. So in the first request David asked for purification, and in the second request he asked God to wash him. The Hebrew word for wash is the same one that we saw back in verse 2, where David asked God to completely wash away his guilt. When we looked at that verse, we saw that this term is used in Exodus 19:10 to refer to washing clothes. Just after the Israelites arrived at Mount Sinai, God told them through Moses to wash their clothes, because God was going to speak directly to the whole nation.

So when David asked God to wash him, he was picturing himself as a set of dirty clothes that needed to be cleaned. Now these days it's pretty simple to get our clothes cleaned. All we need to do is throw them in the washing machine, add some soap, and press start. Even a young child can do that! But back in Old Testament times there were no washing machines. Instead people had to wash their clothes by hand, which was a lot of work. But it wasn't just hard for David to wash himself; it was impossible! There was nothing he could do to get himself clean. He knew that God was the only one who could wash him. That's why he asked God not just once but twice in this psalm to wash him. And here in verse 7 he said that if God washed him, he would be whiter than snow.

Now we don't see too much snow here in our area. I think we've had only two decent snowfalls since my family moved here in 2005. But maybe some of you have lived in colder climates in the past. As most of you know, I grew up in Minnesota, which is a state of extremes. In the summer the weather would get pretty hot and humid. And we would get so many mosquitoes that we would only half-jokingly refer to them as the state bird. But in the winter we would get some of the coldest temperatures that you'll find anywhere in the United States. Almost every winter we would have an entire week when the temperature would not rise above zero degrees. And some winters we would get some crazy snowstorms.

I can still remember the blizzard that we got back in 1991. It's hard to believe that 30 years have passed since then! That was a pretty exciting year for several reasons. I was a big baseball fan back in those days, and our professional team was very good that year. In fact, we won the World Series in what most baseball experts consider to be the best World Series of all time. The series lasted all seven games, with five of them being decided by one run, four of them being decided in the final at-bat, and three of them going into extra innings. The last game was scoreless until the tenth inning, and our starting pitcher went the distance. He pitched 10 innings, which is almost unheard of today.

So that game happened on October 27, and then just four days later on Halloween we had the biggest

blizzard I've ever experienced. It started snowing in the evening, and by morning we had almost three feet of snow! I was 12 years old at the time, and so I loved it. I was out there playing in it the next morning and having a blast. I can still remember waking up and seeing so much snow outside. I just love how white things are outside right after a snowfall. After the snow's been on the ground for a while, it tends to get dirty and doesn't look very nice. But it's so clean and pristine at first. And that's the picture that David wanted us to imagine in Psalm 51:7. He compared himself to snow and said that he would be even whiter than snow if God washed him.

We also see this image in Isaiah 1:18. Listen to this verse: "Come, let us settle this," says the LORD. "Though your sins are scarlet, they will be as white as snow; though they are crimson red, they will be like wool." In this verse we have the same two Hebrew words for white and snow that David used in Psalm 51:7. And in both places the image is referring to moral purity. It's a picture of being forgiven by God. Now in some places the Hebrew word for snow is used negatively to refer to a skin disease. For example, when Miriam spoke against her brother Moses in Numbers 12, verse 10 says that her "skin suddenly became diseased, resembling snow." God was punishing her for selfishly opposing his chosen leader without a legitimate reason. So ironically snow sometimes pictures a condition that requires cleansing!

But normally snow has a positive connotation in Scripture and represents the condition of someone who has been cleansed. In fact, in several places it even refers to Jesus. In Daniel 7 we see a description of a vision that Daniel saw. And in verse 9 he said, "As I kept watching, thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took his seat. His clothing was white like snow, and the hair of his head like whitest wool." In Revelation 1 the apostle John had a similar vision of Jesus. In verse 14 John said that "the hair of his head was white as wool—white as snow." So you shouldn't get upset when your hair starts turning white, because you're becoming more like the way Jesus looked in these visions! White hair generally commands respect and indicates the wisdom that comes with advanced age.

But the white clothing of Jesus in Daniel 7:9 shows us that Jesus was also morally pure. He has never once committed sin, even after he took on human flesh. He was certainly tempted in every way that we are when he was on earth, but he never gave in to temptation. He remained perfect and sinless. And so Jesus didn't just pay the penalty of our sins so that we can be forgiven. He certainly washes our sins away and makes us whiter than snow. We know that God granted David's request, and he forgives us as well if we confess our sins. But Jesus is also our model. He shows us how to live in obedience to God and keep our clothes clean. Let's close in prayer and thank God for granting us the gift of forgiveness and for showing us how to live in purity.